THE MAGAZINE OF

# Fantasy and Science Fiction

FEBRUARY

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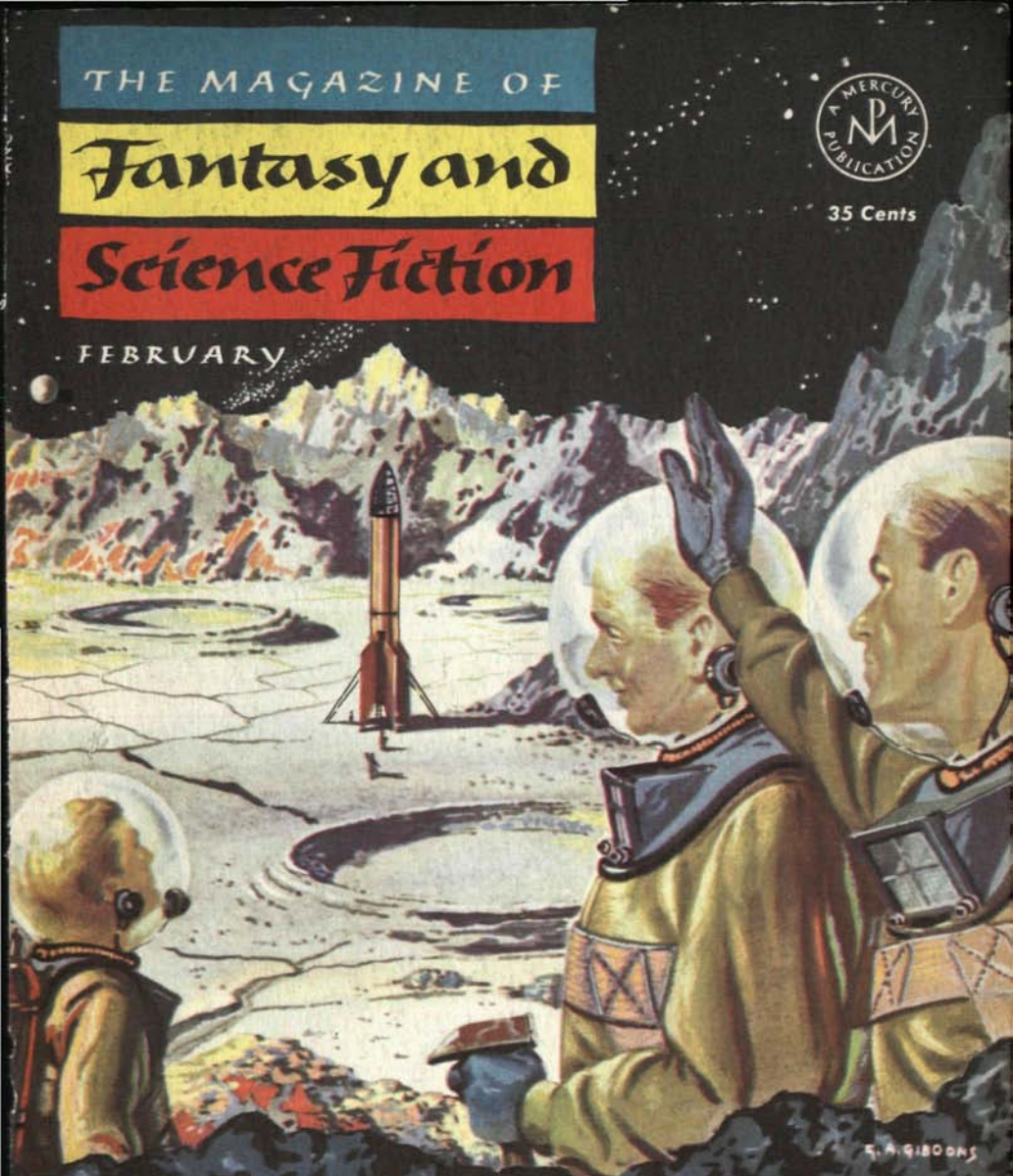

*The Time Watcher* — OLIVER La FARGE
*Maybe Just a Little One* — R. BRETNOR
*The Green Thumb* — L. SPRAGUE de CAMP & FLETCHER PRATT
*One in Three Hundred* — J. T. M'INTOSH

*A selection of the best stories of fantasy and science fiction, new and old*

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# Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 4, No. 2 FEBRUARY

The Green Thumb
*by* L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP & FLETCHER PRATT 3

The Time Watcher *by* OLIVER LA FARGE 10

Loo Ree *by* ZENNA HENDERSON 17

Technical Advisor *by* CHAD OLIVER 30

The Enemy *by* CHRISTOPHER WOOD 41

Stickeney and the Critic *by* MILDRED CLINGERMAN 58

Experiment *by* KAY ROGERS 64

Virtuoso *by* HERBERT GOLDSTONE 67

Recommended Reading *by* THE EDITORS 73

Slipping Through the Keyhole *by* VANCE RANDOLPH 75

One in Three Hundred *by* J. T. M'INTOSH 77

Carne Vale *by* EMILIE H. KNARR 109

Maybe Just a Little One *by* R. BRETNOR 111

Roog *by* PHILIP K. DICK 123

*Cover by George Gibbons*

*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 4, No. 2, FEB., 1953. Published monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, $4.00 in U. S. and possessions; $5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H. under the Act of March 3, 1879.* *Printed in U. S. A. Copyright, 1953, by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved.* *Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.*

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** For the benefit of graduates of Progressive schools, this Latin phrase, freely translated, means "in foreign lands."*

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*Australia is a land where strange things happen — from the exceedingly improbable biology of its native fauna through the arcane bush practices of telepathy and "pointing the bone" (so ably depicted in the detective novels of Arthur W. Upfield) on to the unimaginable events which will attend the Second Australian Science Fiction Convention in Sydney the first weekend of next May. (Australian readers please note!) All things improbable and unimaginable are bound eventually to reach Gavagan's Bar; it was inevitable that the long-suffering Mr. Cohan should eventually have to cope with the spells of an overgrateful Australian bushman.*

# The Green Thumb

*by* L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP
*and* FLETCHER PRATT

YOUNG MR. KEATING from the library joined the group at the bar, ordered his usual rum and coke, and settled himself to listen to Mr. Gross's account of how his uncle Moritz got arrested for keeping a live eel in his bathtub in a hotel in Columbus. He had just reached the point where room service was refusing to send up a box of earthworms for the eel when the narration was interrupted by a sound which caused everyone to turn toward the rear. A pair of female shoulders in a neat print dress was shaken, and the sound repeated itself as an unmistakable sob.

"Crying jag?" suggested Mr. Jeffers.

"Not that she got here," said Mr. Cohan. "It's not more than one Alexander I've been giving her, and her as decent a lady as I ever saw. But this Gavagan will not have; it's bad for the trade."

He walked firmly but gloomily around the end of the bar and placed both hands on the mourner's table. "Begging your pardon, ma'am —" he began.

As she half turned her head, fishing in her purse for a handkerchief, Keating started. "Why, it's Dotty Eichman!" he said and took a step toward her.

"Better not," said Mr. Willison. "Women cry because they enjoy it, and you'll get no thanks for spoiling one of the finest pleasures in her life."

"Oh, come on over and meet her," said Keating. "She's a nice kid, and maybe we can keep her from bawling."

Dotty Eichman had her face under control. She was a brunette



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and pretty. Keating said, "Hello, Dotty. May I present Mr. Willison?"

"How do you do?" She extended a rather limp hand. "Won't you sit down?"

"You're sure you don't —" began Keating.

"Oh, I was just being silly. I'll feel better if I can talk to somebody about it. Have Mr. Cohan bring over your drinks, and I'll have another Alexander."

Keating and Willison accepted the proffered chairs. The former said, "What's the matter, Dotty? Feuding with your in-laws?"

"No, with Tom." She managed a wan smile in the direction of Willison. "My husband."

"Dotty and I are always getting each other out of jams," said Keating. "She was at Mareeba in Australia when I was base adjutant and we had a private agreement to protect each other. Every time one of the fly-boys began to pitch woo, I was engaged to her, and every time one of those Aussie hostesses began to turn on the heat, she was engaged to me. Only I never could persuade her to make it real."

"You can be glad I didn't," said Dotty Eichman. "It's like being under a curse." She sipped her Alexander.

"What is, if I'm not too inquisitive?" said Willison.

"What's happened to me." She addressed Keating. "You remember the time they brought in that colonel?"

"The one with the queer name — Postelthwaite or Throgmorton or something like that?"

"That's right," said Dotty Eichman. "I've been working it out, and that's when it must have started. No, wait, it didn't either start then. It started way back when I was born, and my parents wanted a boy, so they took out their disappointment by trying to make me as much like one as possible. They never taught me to cook or sew or do anything girls do, and when it came time for me to go to college, they wanted me to take a course in engineering. But I just didn't have the aptitude for it; I couldn't remember the formulas or do the mathematics, and all I liked to do was tinker with the machines, so one day I just dropped out and enrolled in a motor mechanics' school, and that was all right too, because I was doing something a man ought to do."

Keating interrupted. "She was good at it, too. It got her a captaincy in the Wacs, and she was line chief at Mareeba."

"Well, anyway," Dotty said, "you see? I was glad to be doing something in the war, and everybody couldn't have been nicer to me, even if I was a woman over a group of men. And then that night they brought this colonel in."

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"I remember his name now," said Keating. "It was Pendermatter."

"That's right, so it was," said Dotty. She turned to Willison. "I don't know whether you know how it was in Australia. Sometimes planes would get forced down in the desert, and unless the fliers were guided back to civilization pretty quickly they would die. Even when everything else was all right, they wouldn't know where the water-holes were. So the American and Aussie governments finally worked out a system of rewards with the bushmen for every flier they brought in alive. So much for a Jap, with the rewards for our people graduated according to their rank. The reward the bushmen liked best was a button in the shape of a sunflower with 'Vote for Landon' written across it. It took a major for them to get one of those."

Keating interrupted again. "We ran out of Landon buttons and the government had to have more made. The contractor must have thought we were crazy."

Dotty finished her Alexander. "Those bushmen are pretty primitive, but they're smart. They can't count above seven, but they very soon got to recognize the different insignia, and if anyone tried to short-change them with a Roosevelt button or a St. Christopher medal, they'd blow up and threaten never to bring in any more, so we had to meet the going price. Then this night one of them brought in this colonel — what was it? Pendermatter. He had started out for some sort of big civic do down in Adelaide, and had his best Sunday uniform on with all sorts of decorations, so that he looked like a Christmas tree with the lights turned up. . . ."

I came out of the officers' club just as they brought him along. There was this little group, two or three Aussie interpreters and Pendermatter and a bushman. He was bouncing up and down and arguing at the top of his voice. Of course I went over to see what was going on. One of the Aussies said the bushman thought that Pendermatter was just about the second son of God in the American army and was demanding a very special reward, something better than anyone ever got before for a downed flyer. "They've already offered the blighter two Landon buttons," he said, "but he won't have them. It has to be something new, and we can't get him to be specific."

The bushman let loose another flood of oratory. The Aussie said he was describing himself as a descendant of the great Bamapama, the greatest medicine man in Australian legend, and saying that only a man with his special powers could have found so high and beautiful an object as Pendermatter, and that was another reason why he was entitled to a special reward. Well, there had been a party at the O club and I was dressed up, and part of it was one of those little charm bracelets that wasn't worth very much, so I

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helped out by offering it to him. The minute I put it in his hand, his eyes bugged out and he began to chatter again, wagging his head. The interpreter said: "Thank you, captain. You appear to have solved our difficulty. Wait a bit, though."

The bushman was picking over the charms on the bracelet. He stopped at one that was a miniature of an old-fashioned cookpot, looked at it and then at me, and began to jabber again. The interpreter said, "He says he's going to make a number one magic when he gets home, so that every time you touch a cookpot, your fingers will have virtue."

I giggled and said something about how I couldn't boil an egg without an assistant, and the interpreter said something about he wondered whether primitive peoples didn't have an order of knowledge that civilization had lost, but I recognized that as a buildup to asking for a date, and walked away and forgot about it. For then, anyway.

You know, Walter (she turned toward Keating), Tom's family didn't care too much about his marrying me. Very sweet to him and all, but the idea of anyone in a Social Register family marrying a mechanic really got them down. I met him when he brought the car into my garage for a checkup on the lube system, and took a chance on going to dinner with him that night. I just wasn't at home with his family, though. I don't mean I behaved like a social goon or anything like that, my parents weren't from the slums or anything, even if they did bring me up to be a mechanic. I knew it was all right when I went places with Tom by the way other people treated me, not Tom's family, but the others. That is, it was all right down to the time they'd find out I was making a living by being a mechanic in my own garage. Then they'd lower the boom.

One night when we were out in the car, he parked it and said, "Dotty, I've been coaxing you to marry me, and I want you to more than ever. But there's a string to it now. There won't be any money."

It didn't even annoy me. I simply said, "What of it? If I marry you, it won't be for money."

"I'll have to go to work," he said. "The mater has laid the law down. If I marry I'll have to earn my own living, and I've been looking around and the best I can get is in an advertising agency at 50 a week."

What could you do with a man like that? I kissed him and said the garage was doing all right, and we'd have to be pretty slow not to get along on what I was making out of it. Then I said yes, I'd be glad to marry him.

You might think that would make him happy. Not at all. He told me I'd have to give up the garage if we were married. He started in with his mother about how she was old and not very well, and she'd just about die if her daughter-in-law was working in a garage and her name came out of

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the Social Register. Well, I got rid of that line by asking him whether he wanted to marry me or stay married to his family, but he only started in on another one, and this one was hard to beat. He said that he'd never really had to work, and now he couldn't let me be the support of the family tree and feel he was doing his part. He wanted it to be an honest marriage, and wanted me to stay home and have children and take care of the house like a normal wife. Well, we argued over it for hours. I remember the roofs of those factories out along the boulevard line were getting green with the light before the sun comes up before he started the car again. But I loved the big ape — I still do — and I ended up by giving in to him. So I sold the garage and put part of the money into furniture for the apartment — he let me do that — and part of it into a hospital fund to pay for a baby if we ever have one, and I took the rest and invested it in a course at the Éclat school of cookery.

I wanted my cooking to be a surprise to him, so I went to the Éclat in the afternoons while he was at work, and didn't say a word about it to him. Maybe that was a mistake. Anyway, we kept on eating out, and I began to notice what he ate. I hadn't before; food was just food and good or punk to me. You find things out about the people you marry, and what I found out was that Tom liked the plainest kind of food: just a piece of roast beef, or some spaghetti with tomato sauce, or baked beans, or a lamb stew in a casserole. He always took me to places where they served that sort of thing. I thought at first it was because we didn't have much money, and once in a while I'd suggest going to a nice place, just to celebrate, but when we did, he'd order the same things. He just likes that kind of food.

At the Éclat they teach the most elaborate French dishes and sauces, starting with the sauces of course, and I did pretty well with them, and I thought if I could get away with that kind of cookery, the things Tom liked would be easy. So I got a Fanny Farmer cookbook and left it around the house and told Tom I was reading it and learning to cook. That made it all right, so I got some beans and pork and told Tom I was going to give him a dish of home-baked beans for dinner the next night. The big lug got so excited he took part of the afternoon off and brought home a bottle to celebrate the occasion, and I guess we both got a little bit high. I thought it was because of not knowing what I was putting in the beanpot that the beans came out the way they did.

They tasted all right to me, but Tom took a couple of forkfuls, then stopped, with a kind of funny look on his face.

"What's the matter, don't you like them?" I asked, and I was afraid I knew the answer already.

I did. He put the fork down and sort of smiled and said, "They're wonder-

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ful, darling. Only I guess I had a little bit too much to drink to be eating such rich food."

Well, I took some of the beans to the Éclat the next day to find out what I'd done wrong. Pierre looked at them suspiciously, put a fork in and tasted, and his eyebrows went up. "In what week of the course are you, madame?" he said.

"The fourth," I told him.

"Of the advanced course, without doubt?"

"No. The elementary."

He yelled for Marcel, who came over and tasted the beans, then pinched his thumb and finger together beside his nose. Pierre said, "I have already discerned in madame the evidence of a talent that may some day rival that of the sacred Escoffier. Imagine, only four weeks, and she already produces a perfect *cassoulet de Midi!* Madame, go home; tell your dolt of a husband that if he has no more appreciation of your artistry, I will marry you myself."

Marcel said, "It is not a true *cassoulet*, but an improvement on the classic pattern. One question, madame: what is the singular poultry of so distinctive a flavor that you have substituted for the goose-meat of the *cassoulet?* My palate tells me it is a game bird."

Then I grabbed a fork and tasted it myself. I must have been high the night before, because the taste was there all right, and I thought I recognized it. It was an awful lot like some of that wild ground turkey we used to get in Australia, you know, Walter. I couldn't imagine how I produced that flavor.

"What audacity!" said Pierre. "The mark of a truly original chef."

Of course a compliment like that was dandy, but all I wanted to do was please Tom. So I tried it again, and kept it real plain. I just fried some pork chops in a skillet and had some boiled potatoes and a salad. He ate it, but he didn't seem very enthusiastic, and I don't blame him; that's no way to treat pork chops. So I tried the kind of lamb stew he likes in a casserole, and it was worse than the baked beans. He wouldn't eat it, but when I took it to the Éclat, Pierre said it was a *rouennaise* of hare and a masterpiece.

It kept on like that. I couldn't figure out any rhyme or reason to it. Tom liked the steaks and chops I cooked, and I even got him to eat some of my sauces, but we can't afford steak and chops often, and every time I cooked something in a casserole, he wouldn't take any. And then tonight he invited his parents over for dinner and they accepted. It was supposed to be sort of a peace offering, and I wanted to fix a particularly good dinner.

So I fixed some roast beef. I thought I couldn't possibly go wrong with that, and it was simple, too, and I'd slip a lemon pie into the oven when the roast came out, and then maybe we'd get together. Tom's mother is one of those tall, thin women who wear a lot of frills and insist on being so feminine

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you can hardly stand it, and I could see when she came she was ready to drop the axe if I got a bit out of line. She looked around the place as though I were keeping Tom in a jail. I served cocktails, of course (and I want another cocktail now, Walter, an Alexander) but the cocktails didn't help much, because she would only take one, and then she asked for the napkin I'd forgotten to give her. She said something about being devoted to her own home.

So it was up to the roast. The moment I took the lid off the roasting pan, I knew things had gone wrong, because it didn't smell the way it should, or look the way it should, and when I cut into it I was sure. It was much darker than it should have been and the texture wasn't right, either. They stopped talking when I passed it, and Tom and his father each cut off a little piece and ate it and then began on the potatoes. Tom's mother, who had never taken her eyes off me for a minute, said, "I'm afraid none of our family care much about game meat, especially when it's been hung so long."

Then I tasted it myself, and I knew. It was kangaroo, and to make it worse, it was flavored with eucalyptus. I could have burst into tears right there, and I was so nervous I did something wrong with the lemon pie and it fell, and the only good thing about the meal was the coffee. After we finished Tom said he thought he'd see them home, and I came over here.

I know now. I've got it all arranged. My fingers have virtue — too much virtue. Every time I cook something in a pot or a casserole or under a lid, it turns into the most elaborate Australian dish, and Tom won't eat it.

"Very interesting," said Willison. "Very interesting. With a talent like that you could open an original restaurant."

"But I don't want to open a restaurant," wailed Dotty Eichman. "I just want Tom. And now I think of it, I want another Alexander."

"If you'll shake it yourself, I'll have one with you," said Willison. "That's made under a lid and you ought to be able to turn it into something."

"Okay," said Dotty. "Did you hear what he said, Mr. Cohan? Load the shaker and bring it over here."

She stood up, grasped the container in firm mechanics' hands, and agitated vigorously. The liquid that foamed into the glasses was a brilliant pink. Keating sipped and said, "A Singapore sling, by God! And made with that awful pineapple gin we used to get."

"Mr. Keating," said Mr. Cohan, with the air of a man trying to halt the rush of an aurochs, "swearing in the presence of ladies is not allowed in Gavagan's, or I'd be doing it myself. That day man is always getting the cherry brandy where the crême de cacao belongs and I must of grabbed the wrong bottle."

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*One memorable day our mail contained a postcard, signed only "W. Lurie," urging us to look up a fantasy about Indians by Oliver La Farge. We did and we wish herewith to thank publicly and deeply W. Lurie of Washington, D. C. for that recommendation. For Oliver La Farge has never more ably demonstrated his justly famed awareness of the Indian mind and spirit than in this brief tale of a wise man who defines to the Black One himself the full meaning of a contract.*

# *The Time Watcher*

*by* OLIVER LA FARGE

I WAS in my house when I saw that my cousin's time had come. I took my staff, and told my wife, "Luwín is finishing now. Make a little prayer here in the house. I am going to him."

My wife is wise, she knows all that concerns me; I did not need to tell her more than that. Then I set out for Luwín's house, in the latter part of the afternoon when the sun is low but still hot. As I walked along, at first I merely let my thoughts run of their own accord, about my cousin, this man of whom I was so fond. As an old man will, I looked at the bright pictures of our childhood within my heart.

Being of the family of Chapa, we were slightly apart from other children of the tribe. There was a distinction which drew all of us cousins together. From among us, more than from other families, would come persons of sacred gifts, to Show the Road, to Teach Prayer, to Heal. Some group of brothers and sisters among us were children of the Time Watcher; upon some one of us in his time, the gods would lay that burden.

There are villages nowadays in which the Time Watcher is known to all, he performs his task as if it were an office, he receives honor and his power is slight. Those are the tribes where many men speak Castilian, even some of the women, where they are beginning to put on shoes and become Ladinos. We of Nanluum keep to the true way; only the Principal of the Village and a few priests know who is the Time Watcher, save for his wife and perhaps his sons. Wherefore our people do not die when they go far away, traveling, and there is no sorcery among us.

When he was a boy Luwín knew, as I learned much later, that his own



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father was Watcher of our time in those days. It made him feel a responsibility. When he was already a big boy, he was thoughtful of us little ones. He was considerate, so that we grew up loving him, and I particularly, as we became older, was intimate with him.

It is a good league from where I live to Luwín's house. I had plenty of time to remember my grief when the soldiers came and took him to carry their packs while they went to war. For two years he was with the army, and he was corrupted. He tried to make himself a Ladino. He was ashamed, then, to make his prayer and his offering to the cross of his fathers. Far away among the men who wear shoes, he began to feel his powers, and after their custom, he studied sorcery. He came back speaking Castilian, dressed like a Ladino, pretending to be one. He was at odds with his own tribe, he bore a grudge against the world. I remembered him as he was then, how sorry I felt for him, how I thought for him.

As I climbed the hill to the house where death and the Black One waited for him and me, I fixed the details of his life in my heart. I was afraid, as the sun dropped low. Over and over in my heart I built my strength as I came to Luwín's house.

I entered without knocking, calling a greeting as I crossed the threshold. The fire was dead, there were no offerings, no flowers or pine-tips around his little father cross on the altar, the place was already almost dark. He lay on his bed under an old blanket, his face drawn and pale. One could see the fear sitting on his heart.

"It's no use, Palás," he said. "I cannot answer any more questions. I cannot show you the road now. I am finished. Leave me alone, cousin."

I went ahead and made a fire, while he watched me, too weak to lift his head. Then I took beeswax, resin, copal and pine-tips from the pouch I carried and went to the altar.

"No use to do that," he said, "our father there will not serve me. For 50 years now, I have not fed him for myself, only when I made prayer for others."

"Still let us feed him," I answered, putting the offerings before the cross, lighting the resin and setting on it the sweet-scented copal.

"Do as you like," he said, "but it is no use. I know you are a good man, and your prayers are strong, but you cannot help me. Now go away."

I thought that he did not want me to know the greatness of his sin, and also that he wished to save me from great harm if the Tiltik should find me here. I was planning hard, for there was no way to help him unless he himself confessed to me. So I made myself stupid.

"You talk strangely," I said. "Perhaps you have a fever. I shall stay with you."

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He hesitated. "There is danger here."

"What danger?" I said. "I am old. Death is my uncle."

He hesitated again, but he was fond of me, and at last he made himself say, "The Tiltik is coming."

"How can that be?" I asked. "The Time Watchers of our tribe have been famous. We have no sorcerers; the Tiltik dares not cross our boundaries."

He closed his eyes, lying still and thinking. Then he said, "For many years no one has watched the time of these people. No one has guarded them. There is no Watcher in this village." His voice was very weary.

"Foolishly you talk," I said. "You and I, who are Chapas, know that there must be one among our relatives, even though we do not know who he may be."

"There is none." He waited again, thinking. "I will tell you. You have some kind of power, I don't know what. And it is well to confess even though it be useless. I am the Time Watcher."

"Well then —" I made myself surprised.

"But I never took up my burden. I never did anything about it. Listen: I sold my soul, I made a bargain with the Tiltik. I, the Time Watcher. I am accursed. Now he is coming for me. Go away and be safe."

I shook my head. "Why do you think you are the Watcher?"

He sighed. "Prop up my head, then, I shall tell you the whole, and hope then that you will go away.

"My father was Time Watcher. There is no reason why I should not let you know that now.

"I was unhappy when I was away. I was pretending to be Ladino, and really I wanted to be Indian again. I counted on two things for my return, on my father and that girl I wanted to marry, with whom I had spoken when she went to get water. With their help I should forget the evil magic, I should return to my kind.

"But I came back to find my father dead and the girl married to Keshel. I went to Keshel's house, I sat by his fire. They were ill-at-ease, and sought to please me. While I was there, looking at that woman and seeing her bustling for another man, joined with him, my heart burned, my heart fought. Sitting there, I thought of all my sorrows. There is no Time Watcher, I thought, and I am a sorcerer. Then it came to me, it was I to whom my father's burden was given, it was I who should protect the village from sorcerers, from the Tiltik, from evil happenings on the roads.

"I left hastily and I thought hard. I walked long by myself, I decided to repay myself for all that had happened to me, to punish this world which had turned against me. I decided to call the Tiltik and make a contract."

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"What was your contract?" I asked.

"First, that since he was to have my soul, he would treat this village just as if it had a Time Watcher, save for what concerned me."

"Why did you ask that? I thought you were angry with the village."

"I was. I don't know why. It came to me, then, as if it had been told to me, and he agreed."

"Then what?"

"That he would help me in all my sorcery. I could make myself rich and great, I could become Principal of the Village. I could take that woman, and as many others as I chose. I could wither my enemies."

It was quite dark now. I looked around in the firelight, putting on some sticks of fat pine. I thought to myself, that if he had not completed that evil bargain, he would always have gone on trying after evil, nursing his anger. The pine sticks flared up, showing the room's bareness and disorder.

"Have you chests of gold hidden?" I said. "This house is poorer than when you moved into it."

He said, "When will you let me die? People mentioned my name, they came to me. I became a Shower of the Road. I waited for time enough to myself to get rid of the smell of incense, and set down that burden. Then when I did have a space of time, all I felt was pity for my village, for its people whose troubles I knew so well, who needed me. Some day, I thought, I shall do a few things for myself, but I have been too busy, year after year. And now I am finished. You cannot have any more foolish questions. Go away. The Tiltik has to come."

Luwín rolled his head off the folded robe I had put under it, and closed his eyes. He was exhausted, but he had confessed. He lay there in that pain, and the fear to which he had resigned himself, his face gaunt and hollow and dark.

I warmed my hands again.

"Good now," I said. "Let him come now, that Tiltik."

I saw Luwín's eyelids flicker, but he was past speaking.

"Come now," I said. "We are ready for you. We bid you come."

The Tiltik came. It was as if a cold wind blew in the house, a dead, wet cold, although the air was quite still. The fire lost force. By the foot of Luwín's bed there was a black shadow with form to it. One saw no specific thing, but afterwards one would remember a face and shoulders. There was power there. It seemed as though the greatness of my cousin's fear overflowed from him to make that Tiltik.

Luwín turned his head slightly and opened his eyes. They were filmy. He tried to speak, and made a moaning sound. His breath rasped. I assembled my power, I became fully what I am. I was excited and afraid of failure,

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and glad that the end of this long struggle had come; all this I subdued within myself.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "There is an altar and a four-pointed cross in this house. How come you within the boundaries of this village?"

The Tiltik answered me. "At no time has this man made prayer for himself to this little cross. At no time has he fed it on his own account. His father did before him, and you have since, but he never. I can do as I please in this house."

"You know better than what you are saying," I told him. "The cross of his fathers is fat with offerings, it is strong, its content exists, there. That he prayed always for others, showing them the road, only makes his prayers stronger. You know that."

"True," said the Tiltik shortly. He was angry, he became bigger, his darkness spread.

My cousin looked towards me, as though he wished to tell me to run away before the Black One became furious and destroyed me.

"I came for what is mine," the Tiltik said. "No cross, no power can prevent me from taking my own."

He slid an arm of blackness along my cousin's bed. I could see the green fear leap up in Luwín as he felt it; I thought his soul would leap visibly out of his body. He could not even moan. I, too, was well afraid.

"What is yours is yours," I said. "But where is it? I do not see it here."

"Nonsense you talk," the Tiltik said. "You waste my time." He slid the arm of his influence almost to Luwín's head. "Here it is, mine by contract, sold to me freely. Go home, you Palás, to that which is within your power."

"There was no sale. There was an offer for sale, but no purchase was made. Make yourself small, you have nothing here."

The darkness came away from along the blanket. "I see we must argue," he said. "Perhaps you will talk yourself into my service. You want to lay the matter before the Great Lords. Very well.

"It was a fair bargain; if he fooled himself, that is his business and no fault of mine. You yourself have bought and sold a horse in your time."

"True," I said, "but if a man offers to buy my horse, and takes him, and no money, no object, not a little copper coin nor a measure of grain has been given me, the horse is still mine. I take him back. Is it not so?"

"Cease quibbling," the Tiltik said. "I made a contract, I kept it."

"You promised you would do all in your power to help him in his sorcery?" I said.

"Yes. Why not?"

"You promised nothing then. You agreed to treat this village as if there were a Time Watcher in it?"

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"Yes. Why not?"

"You agreed to nothing, then. Can a man ask pay for not stopping the sun from rising?"

"That doesn't matter," the Tiltik said. "The terms of the bargain are of no importance. When he took that wicked thought into his heart, when he was willing to reject a sacred burden, when he called me and offered to bargain with me, right there he became mine. There is no power here to stop me."

He became wider, more menacing, he seemed to press outward towards me, to push against the firelight. He reached, he flowed towards Luwín. The place was full of a cold which was inside one, not on his skin. Fear looked out of all the corners.

"I shall not argue the second part of what you say," I said. "If it be true or untrue, will soon be proven. There was a reason for letting him fulfill his thought, as you well know. For the first part: a sin can be atoned," I said. "He has paid a thousand times over for his time of wishing evil. That cannot bind him now. You have only your contract, and in that there was deceit."

"How then?" The Tiltik asked. "I grow tired of your chatter. How then?"

"Before the lizard had feasted, before the stones turned over, before the bargain was closed, he was excited then. He was afraid of what he was doing, and he excited himself to complete it, telling himself what desired things it would bring. He talked so as to encourage himself."

"True," the Tiltik said. "What of it?" He was uneasy.

"On that night, at that time, you were pleased to be trapping a good soul for your service, and you were afraid that he might draw back."

The Tiltik was slow in answering. "True," he said.

"When, then, at the last moment he faltered, when he said to you, 'You will give me that girl, now as soon as this night is over you will give her to me, to have as long as I please,' when he said that, in those words, what did you answer?"

The Tiltik grew, he became huge, he filled the house. "I answered 'Yes,' " he said with a roar.

"And you knew you lied," I said.

He reached up to the rafters, up to the rooftree, he stretched from side to side, he crushed the fire down. There were great seizing hands.

"What of it?" He roared. "You have let me in. I shall take you both, then I shall consume your village."

I leapt up, I rose high, with all my power in me, and with my staff in my hand.

"Let us try ourselves, then," I shouted. "Out! Out, Black One, Evil

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One, out Thief, out Liar! Now the crosses of the corners close in, the four directions close in, the middle arises. Out, out of this land!"

There was a great noise of the wind which stirred nothing. Stars were blotted out and appeared again, one after another. Then there was silence, and the dogs of the outlying farms near us, and down in the village, began to howl together. The fire lept up brightly, giving forth warmth.

I looked at Luwín. His eyes were open, his face was tranquil, happy, and he had the astonished look of a man to whom a surprising truth has just become clear.

"No matter how great one's power," I said, "one cannot read the unseen in what concerns himself."

He smiled faintly, then he turned his head towards his cross, and his lips moved. I was satisfied then, I let him go.

I arranged him, and set the death candles around him. Later I would call the family to lament him properly.

I felt tired and peaceful, and ready for my own time to come. It was over, the life-long struggle, the constant vigilance, the heaviest part of my burden since first, when my cousin's father died, I became the Time Watcher of this village.

**Note:**

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*Although she has been writing professionally just a little over a year Zenna Henderson seems well on her way to the top rank among our contributors. Her* Come On, Wagon! *(F&SF, December, 1951) was listed as a "distinctive American short story" in Martha Foley's* BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES *1952. (The third of this magazine's "firsts" to be so honored.) Miss Henderson's* Ararat *(F&SF, October, 1952) was, to judge from the enormous number of ecstatic letters from readers, easily the most popular story we published last year. Her first entry in the sweepstakes of 1953 was written before* Ararat *and is not a chronicle of The People. It is, rather, a story about a seemingly ordinary person, a nice but commonplace schoolteacher. But a good teacher can also be a great, if unspectacular, heroine.*

# Loo Ree

*by* ZENNA HENDERSON

LOTS OF CHILDREN have imaginary playmates. You probably had one yourself if you were an only child or a lonesome one. Or if you didn't, you've listened to stories about children who cried because Daddy shut the door on Jocko's tail or Mommie stepped right in the middle of Mr. Gepp while he was napping on the kitchen floor. Well, being a first grade teacher, I meet some of these playmates occasionally, though they stay home more often than not. After all, when you start to school, you aren't alone or lonesome any more. I've seldom known such a playmate to persist at school for more than a week or so. And yet — there was Loo Ree.

Of course I didn't see Loo Ree. I didn't even know Loo Ree was there when Marsha came to register the Saturday before school began. Marsha and her mother sat down across the cafeteria table from me as I reached for the registration material stacked in front of me in anticipation of the morning rush.

I said, "Good morning," to the nervous parent and smiled at the wide-eyed, eager little girl who sat a seat removed from her mother.

"Wouldn't you like to move over closer?" I asked.

"No, thank you." Marsha sighed a sigh of resigned patience. "Loo Ree doesn't like to be crowded."

"Marsha!" Her mother shook a warning head.

"Oh?" I said inanely, trying to read mother's eyebrows and Marsha's



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eyes and the birth certificate in front of me all at the same time. "Well! So Marsha's six already. That's nice. We like them that old. They usually do better."

As casual as that was the advent of Loo Ree to my classroom. But it didn't stay casual for long. In fact, the second day, as the children lined up to come in at noon, I heard the spat of an openhanded blow and a heartbroken five-and-a-half-year-old wail.

"What's the matter, Stacy? What happened?" I knelt beside the pig-tailed, blue-ginghamed little girl who was announcing to high heaven her great grief.

"She hit me!" An indignant tear-wet finger was jabbed at Marsha.

"Why, Marsha!" I applied kleenex vigorously to Stacy's eyes and nose. "We don't hit each other. What's wrong?"

"She crowded in where Loo Ree was supposed to be."

"Loo Ree?" I searched the faces around me. After all, I had 34 faces to connect with 34 names, among which were Bob, Bobby, Bobette, Karen, Carol, Carolyn and Carl.

"Yes." Marsha's arm curved out in a protective gesture to the empty air beside her. "Loo Ree's supposed to be by me."

"Even so, Marsha, you shouldn't have hit Stacy. In the first place, she's smaller than you and then hitting is no way to settle anything. Stacy didn't know Loo Ree was there, did you Stacy?"

"No." Stacy edged away from Marsha warily.

"Did Loo Ree tell you to hit Stacy?" I asked, because it was so very real to Marsha.

Marsha shook her head and looked at her bent arm questioningly. Then shamed color swept up her face. "No, ma'am and Loo Ree says I wasn't nice. I'm supposed to say I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Stacy."

"Well, that's the way polite children talk. Now, where's our straight lines so we can come in?"

As the boy line and the girl line clattered past me into the room, I heard Bob, skidding in his new shoes, mutter to Bobby, barefooted and ragged, "I don't see no Loo Ree. Do you?"

"School's funny," reminded Bobby.

"Oh," said Bob.

In the weeks that followed Loo Ree did not fade out as other imaginary playmates have done in the past. Rather, Loo Ree became quite a fixture in our room. Bob was taught, the hard way, to respect Marsha's good right fist and Loo Ree's existence when Marsha bloodied his nose all down the front of his Hopalong Cassidy shirt for saying Loo Ree was a lie. And poor

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little Bobby — he of the rusty, bare feet, the perpetually runny nose, the pinched blue look of chronic hunger and neglect — he sat all one morning staring at the chair where Marsha said Loo Ree was sitting. I saw the sunrise in his face when he suddenly leaned over and smoothed one grimy hand apparently down Loo Ree's hair and smiled shyly.

"Loo Ree," he stated to the room and, for an astonishing minute, looked fed and cared-for and loved.

The children learned — by, I fear, punching, poking and many heated words from Marsha — not to sit down on Loo Ree in the chair by the corner table where crayons and paper were kept. They learned so well that once, when a visiting mother lowered her not inconsiderable bulk into the chair, the concerted horrified gasp from the room turned to relieved smiles only when Marsha finally nodded. Loo Ree had slipped out from under in time.

So the children slowly accepted Loo Ree and out on the playground, they solemnly turned the jumping rope, chanting the jumping rhyme for Loo Ree and Loo Ree never missed.

Loo Ree was as real and immediate to them as Santa Claus or Roy Rogers and far less exotic than Tarzan or Superman. One Monday morning when the week's paper monitors were being appointed, the children even insisted that it was Loo Ree's turn to be monitor of row five. There were the makings of a small riot until Marsha stood up and said bluntly, "Loo Ree isn't any monitor. Loo Ree is — is something special." And that settled that.

It was towards the end of the first six weeks of school that Marsha came up to my desk, her left hand trailing behind her, leading Loo Ree. She leaned on the corner of my desk.

"Loo Ree wants to know when we're going to start reading," she said.

"Well, you tell Loo Ree that as soon as we finish learning our word cards, we'll get our little red books."

Marsha looked disturbed. "But, Teacher, I don't have to tell Loo Ree. You already did."

"I'm sorry, Marsha. Remember, I can't see Loo Ree. Is Loo Ree a boy or a girl?"

Marsha inspected the air at her left thoughtfully.

"Loo Ree's got long, gold hair. Well, not exactly hair. But it's real gold like Mommie's ring. Loo Ree's got a long dress. Well, not exactly a dress —" Marsha stopped baffled. "Loo Ree, which are you?" Her eyes focused about a foot away. Then she wrinkled her forehead. "Loo Ree says she isn't either one, but we can say she's a girl because she stays mostly with me."

"Good," I said, my head whirling in perfect figures of eight. "Well, then, as soon as we know our words, we'll get our books. Now you go back to your seat and draw me a picture of Loo Ree so I'll know what she looks like."

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I forgot about the picture until just before lunch. Marsha came up with a piece of paper in each hand. She held out one — a much smudged and wrinkled piece of manila paper.

"Teacher, I couldn't do it very good because Loo Ree doesn't look the same all the time."

I looked at her picture. There were wavering lines of yellow and orange and round little circles of blue, vaguely face-like in arrangement. "I suppose it would be hard," I said. "What's that other one?"

"Loo Ree drew it with her finger. She says you'll have to look fast because your eyes will make it go away." She gave the paper to me and went back to her seat.

I glanced down, expecting some more of Marsha's unformed figures, but instead, my eyes dazzled and contracted before a blinding flare of brightness. I blinked and caught the after-brightness behind my eyelids. All I had distinguished was a half-halo of brilliance and a feeling of — well, I almost said "awe." I looked at the paper again and there was nothing on it. I rubbed my hand across it and felt a fading warmth against my palm.

It was the next day, after the dismissal bell had rung and the 34 restless occupants of my room exploded out the door and into the buses, that the next chapter of Loo Ree began.

I was trying to straighten out my front desk drawer into which I push, dump or cram anything and everything all day long when I heard, "I want to learn to read."

"Why of course you do," I said automatically, not looking up. "It's fun and that's why we come to school. But you'd better scoot now or the bus will go off without you."

"I want to learn to read *now*."

I sorted out six thumb tacks, a hair ribbon, a piece of bubble gum and three marbles before I looked up.

"It takes time —"

I stopped. No one was in the room. Nothing was there except the late sun slanting across the desks and showing up the usual crushed crayolas on the floor around Bob's desk. I rubbed one grimy hand across my forehead. Now wait a minute. I know I've been teaching for quite a spell, but heavens to Hannah, not *that* long. Hearing voices is just about the last stop before the genteel vine-covered barred window. I took a deep breath and bent to my task again.

"Teacher, I must learn to read."

My hands froze on the tangled mass of Yo-Yo strings and Red Cross buttons. The voice was unmistakeable. If this was hallucination, then I'd gone

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too far to come back. I was afraid to raise my eyes. I spoke past my choked throat.

"Who are you?"

There was a soft, musical laugh. "I drew my picture for you. I'm Loo Ree."

"Loo Ree?" My palsied fingers plucked at the matted strings. "Then if I look, I can't see you?"

"No, probably not. Your eyes are limited, you know." The voice had nothing childish about it, but it sounded very young — and very wise.

"Can Marsha see you?" Nothing like satisfying my curiosity, now that some of the shock was wearing off.

"Not really. She senses me and has made an image to satisfy her, but as she told you, I seem to change all the time. Her concept of me changes."

"Why?" A thousand questions piled up behind my tongue but part of my mind was still shrieking, hallucination! hallucination! Finally I managed, "Why are you here?"

"I must go to school and learn to read and I can't take the time to pace myself to Marsha's speed. Could you help me?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so," I replied absently, as I tried to decide if the voice was like the taste of sweet music or the sound of apple blossoms. "But you know the language — your vocabulary is so —"

"I can get all the oral coaching I need, without help," said Loo Ree. "But I must attend school and learn to read from this level because it is very necessary that I not only know the words, but that I also get the —" she paused — "the human concept and background that goes with them."

"But why do you have to learn to read? Why come to me? After all, to teach someone — or something — I can't see! Who are you?"

Loo Ree's voice was infinitely patient. "It doesn't matter who I am and it isn't just the mechanics of reading I need. But it is important to you and to your world that I learn what I must as soon as possible. It's not only important, it's vital."

I quivered under the urgency of her voice, the voice that I seemed to feel more than actually hear. I pressed my hands down hard on the edge of my desk, then I picked up the word cards for the first pre-primer.

"O. K. Let's go over these words first."

So it was that my principal, little, driedup, Mr. Grively, brisk, efficient and utterly at sea when it came to the primary age levels, bounced into my room and found me briskly flashing word cards and giving phonetic cues to a reading circle of empty first grade chairs. For a moment he seemed to visualize the vine-covered bars too, then he smiled into my embarrassed confusion.

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"Preparing your lessons for tomorrow, I see!" He beamed, "How I wish all of my teachers were as conscientious!" And he bounced out again.

Loo Ree and I laughed together before we went back to *Dick, Jane, funny, run, oh, see.*

Whatever Loo Ree was — it wasn't stupid. Before I went home at four thirty, she had mastered the words for the first three pre-primers and I left her vocalizing in the shadowy class room, the pages of the open little blue book, third of the series, fluttering to

"*Mother said, 'Come, come.*
*Come and help me work.'* "

In the weeks that followed Loo Ree finished, either by herself or to me, every reader and supplementary reader in my book closet. Then she went on up through the grades, absorbing like a blotter everything in all the available books. She reported to me each afternoon and I worked up quite a reputation among my fellow workers for staying at school after I was free to go home. They couldn't decide whether I was over-concientious, incompetent or crazy. In fact, I began to wonder, myself.

It was several weeks later that I suddenly noticed that all was not well with Marsha. I was conducting the last vocabulary review for Group 1 before giving them their new books when it dawned on me that Marsha wasn't in Group 1 any more. I ran my finger down my reading group schedule and there was Marsha — in Group 5! I counted rapidly backwards through the past days and realized with a shamed sinking feeling that Marsha hadn't progressed an inch beyond where she was when I first talked with Loo Ree. And I hadn't even noticed! That was the shameful part. So after Group 1 returned to their seats, clutching joyfully their new blue books, I sat and looked at Marsha. She was looking across the aisle at Stacy's new book, her face so forlorn that I could have cried.

Group 5 came up for reading after lunch and Marsha sat there apathetically with Bobby, sniffing with his perpetual cold, and 'Naldo, who 'don't got moch Eenglich, Teesher' and Clyde, whose parents most obviously had lied him a year older than he was to get him into school sooner. She parroted the first pre-primer words only after the others gleefully prompted her and she didn't even care when she called *Dick, Mother* and *Spot, Puff.*

I kept her at my desk when the others went to their seats. I put my arm around her and hugged her to me.

"What's the matter, Marsha? You aren't learning your words."

She twisted out of my arm and looked blankly out of the window.

"I don't care."

"But the children are all getting ahead of you. You don't even have your red book yet."

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"I don't care."

"Oh, Marsha!" I reached for her but she avoided me. "You wanted to learn to read so much. You and Loo Ree —"

Marsha's mouth quivered, "Loo Ree — I don't like Loo Ree anymore."

"Why?"

"Just 'cause. She doesn't like me. She won't play with me any more."

"I'm sorry, Marsha, but that's no reason for you not to learn your words."

Marsha's wet eyes blazed at me. "*You* showed Loo Ree how first! Loo Ree can read already. And you didn't show me!"

Oh lordy, I thought, shame to me. And that Loo Ree. This is all her fault.

I took Marsha's hands firmly to hold her attention.

"Listen, honey-one. You remember, you told the children that Loo Ree was someone special? Well, she is. She is so special that she learned to read much faster than the other children, but they're trying and you're not. Do you want to make Loo Ree ashamed of you?"

She hung her head. "I don't care. She likes you better anyway."

"Even if that were so, Marsha — and I don't think it is — what about your mother and father? Were they pleased when Bob took home his book and you didn't?"

"No." Her voice was very small.

"Well, you know," I said enthusiastically, "You could get your little red book tomorrow, if you knew your words, and then you could go as fast as you could, all by yourself, and maybe catch up with Bob and Stacy pretty soon. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Marsha's face brightened, "Uh Huh!"

"Of course you would. Here, let's see how many more words you have to learn."

Marsha sat down on the little chair and, taking a deep breath, read every flashed word in the first bunch of cards without error.

"Why, Marsha!" I cried, my aching conscience easing a little, "of course you're ready for the little red book."

And after we rejoiced together and wrote her name neatly inside the cover, Marsha sailed proudly back to her seat, both hands clutching the thin, paperbacked little red book.

The next afternoon when Loo Ree came to me with a tool catalog she had found in the janitor's supply closet, asking for explanation of things as foreign to me as the azimuth of the subdeclension if there is such a thing, I exploded.

"Foof to this whole deal!" I flung down a piece of chalk so hard that it

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bounced. "I think I'm just plain nuts, staying after school like this when I'm sagging with exhaustion, and for why? To talk to myself and wave my arms around at nothing. And it's your fault I'm neglecting my kids and poor Marsha! You should be ashamed of yourself, dropping the poor baby like that and breaking her heart! Well, goodbye, whatever you are, if you are anything! I'm going home!"

"But teacher, please!"

"Please, nothing. End of the line. All out." And I slammed the door so hard that the glass quivered. I drove home, defiantly running a boulevard stop at Argent Avenue and getting a ticket for it.

That night I got a telephone call from Marsha's mother. She wanted to know if Marsha had got into trouble at school.

"Why no," I said. "Marsha hasn't been very happy but she's one of my best behaved children. I've been a little worried about her reading but she got her book today. Why?"

"Well," her mother hesitated. "You do know about Loo Ree, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," I replied, maybe a little heatedly.

"Well, a while back, Marsha said Loo Ree was too busy to play with her much any more. I was relieved, because — well —" She laughed awkwardly. "Anyway, she hardly ever mentioned her again, except when she was very unhappy, but tonight she told me Loo Ree was back and Marsha's spent the whole evening reading to her out of her new book." Again the embarrassed laugh. "You'd almost swear Loo Ree was prompting her. Everything's been all right here at home, so I wondered if at school —"

"Why no, Mrs. Kendall. Marsha's doing fine now."

After some more usual teacher-parent chitchat, I hung up.

I don't know whether it was my conscience or Loo Ree that sat heavy on my chest all night and read choice selections from *A Survey of Hiroshima*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Ostermeir's *Morbid Pathology*, all complete with technicolor illustrations. Anyway, next afternoon I was sitting behind my desk, propping my heavy head up on one hand while Loo Ree read from *The Koran* to me. She had unearthed it in a pile of books contributed to the last library drive at school.

So time went on and Marsha didn't mention Loo Ree again. I could tell she was still unhappy and felt left out and she too often moped by herself on the playground instead of leading the games as she used to. I was worried about her but I couldn't set my mind to her problem while the lessons with Loo Ree went on and on, sandwiched between Christmas program rehearsals, a combination that left me dragged out and practically comatose when the week before Christmas vacations arrived.

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Loo Ree was reading *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and I was thanking heaven that there was a glossary of sea life terms in the back of the book. I was supporting my weary head as usual and I let the sound of her voice flow over me like a shadowy river and must have dozed because my cheek slipped from my hand and I caught myself just in time to keep my head from thumping on the desk.

*And there was Loo Ree*, standing by me, holding the closed book in one hand. I must have a beautiful imagination because she was — I have no words for her beauty. Even if I tried, I could only compare her to what I have experienced — and she was way outside any of my experiences, but I can remember her eyes —

Loo Ree smiled. "I have learned to read."

I gaped at her, still sluggish with the cumulative weariness that teachers everywhere will understand.

Loo Ree spoke again. "I've finished, teacher. I've learned what I had to learn."

I should have skipped on the high hills and leaped from leaf blade to leaf blade with delight and relief but instead, my heart lurched and slowed with dismay.

"You're finished? How come? I mean, how do you know?"

"I just know." Loo Ree put the book down gently. "It would be useless to try to thank you for the help you have given me. There's no way to repay you and you will never know how far your influence will be felt."

I smiled ruefully. "That's nothing new to a teacher. Especially a first grade teacher. We're used to it."

"Then it's good-bye." Loo Ree began to fade and pale away.

"Wait!" I stood up, holding tight to my desk. My weariness set tears in my eyes and thickened my voice. "All my life I'll think I was crazy these last few months. I'll wonder and wonder what you are and why you are, if you don't — it seems to me the least you can do is tell me a little bit. Tell me something so I'll be able to justify to myself all this time I've spent on you and the shameful way I have neglected my children. You can't just say good-bye and let it go at that." I was sobbing, tears trailing down my face and smearing the bottoms of my glasses.

Loo Ree hesitated and then flooded back brighter.

"It's so hard to explain —"

"Oh, foof!" I cried defiantly, taking off my glasses and smearing the tears across both lenses with a tattered kleenex. "So I'm a dope, a moron! If I can explain protective coloration to my six-years-olds and the interdependence of man and animals, you can tell me something of what the score is!" I scrubbed the back of my hand across my blurry eyes.

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"If you have to, start out 'Once upon a time'." I sat down — hard.

Loo Ree smiled and sat down, too. "Don't cry, teacher. Teachers aren't supposed to have tears."

"I know it," I sniffed. "A little less than human — that's us."

"A little more than human, sometimes." Loo Ree corrected gently. "Well, then, you must understand that I'll have to simplify. You will have to dress the bare bones of the explanation according to your capabilities.

"Once upon a time there was a classroom. Oh, cosmic in size, but so like yours that you would smile to recognize it if you could see it all. And somewhere in the class room something was wrong. Not the whispering and murmuring — that's usual. Not the pinching and poking and tattling that goes on until you get so you don't even hear it."

I nodded. How well I knew.

"It wasn't even the sudden blow across the aisle or the unexpected wrestling match in back of the room. That happens often, too. But something else was wrong. It was an undercurrent, a stealthy, sly sort of thing that has to be caught early or it disrupts the whole classroom and tarnishes the children with a darkness that will never quite rub off.

"The teacher could feel it — as all good teachers can — and she spoke to the principal. He, being a good principal, immediately saw the urgency of the matter and also saw that it was beyond him, so he called in an Expert."

"You?" I asked, feeling quite bright because I had followed the analogy so far.

Loo Ree smiled. "Well, I'm part of the Expert." She sobered. "When the Expert received the call, he was so alarmed by the very nature of the difficulty that he rushed in with a group of investigators to find where the trouble lay." Loo Ree paused. "Here I'll have to stretch my analogy a little.

"It so happened that the investigators were from another country. They didn't know the language of the school or the social system that set up the school — only insofar as its broad resultant structure was concerned. And there was no time for briefing the investigators or teaching them the basics of the classroom. Time was too short because if this influence could not be changed, the entire classroom would have to be expelled — for the good of the whole school. So it had to be on the job training. So —"

Loo Ree turned out her hands and shrugged.

"Gee!" I let out my breath with the word and surreptitiously wiped my wet palms against my skirt. "Then you're one of them, finding out about our world."

"Yes," Loo Ree replied. "And we believe now that the trouble is that the balance between two opposing influences has been upset and, unless we can restore the balance — catastrophe."

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"The Atom Bomb!" I breathed. "The principal must have found radioactivity in our atmosphere —" I gleaned wildly from my science fiction.

"Atom bomb?" Loo Ree looked puzzled. "No. Oh no, not the atom bomb. It is much more important than that. Your world should get over being so scared of loud noises and sudden death. If you would all set your minds to some of the more important things in your life, you wouldn't have such loud noises and so many sudden deaths to fear."

"But the hydrogen bomb —"

"At the risk of being trite," smiled Loo Ree, "there are fates worse than death. It's not so important how you die or how many die with you. Our group is much more concerned with how you live and how many live as you do. You should be more concerned with living. I think you are, individually, because I have seen you in your classroom, distressed by a symptom of this unbalance. Or rather, by symptoms of symptoms of the unbalance.

"Anyway, in the course of my assignment, I followed Marsha to you. Of course the mere mechanical learning to read was no problem, but I needed to learn all the extra unwritten things in the use of a language that give it its meat and motive power in society.

"Besides that, you know that school is usually the first experience of the child outside the home environment. His first school years are a large factor in determining his adjustment to society. So I have been observing, first hand, the classroom procedure, the methods —"

"You've been observing!" I gasped. "Oh Lordy, why didn't you warn me?"

"The results would have been invalid if I had," smiled Loo Ree.

"But the times I've hollered at them — that I've lost my temper — that I've spanked — that I've fallen so short —"

"Yes, and the times you've comforted and wiped noses and answered questions and tied hair ribbons and fed the hungry wonder in their eyes.

"However, I am ready to submit my data now. We might be able to start the turning of the balance because of what I have learned from you. You'd better pray, as I do, that we can get started before the unbalance becomes irreversable. If that happens —" Loo Ree shivered and stood up. "So there it is, teacher, and I must go now."

"But wait. What shall I do about Marsha? You know what has been happening to her. What can I do to help her? I know that she's awfully small compared to a world or a cosmos, but she is lost and unhappy —"

"A child *is* a cosmos and a world," said Loo Ree. "But you have handled such problems before and you don't really need my help. The trouble would have arisen even if I hadn't come. She just happened to choose me to express her difficulty. You can handle it all right.

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"Good-bye, teacher."

"I'm glad you came to me," I said humbly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," said Loo Ree.

She was suddenly a tall pillar of light in the dusky room. As natural as breathing, I slid to my knees and bowed my head above my clasped hands. I felt Loo Ree's hand briefly and warmly on my head and when I looked up, there was nothing in the room but the long, long shadows and me.

The next morning, I sat at my desk, feeling so empty and finished inside that it seemed impossible to go on. Loo Ree had been more of my life than I had known. All this time she had been giving more to me than I to her. Now I felt as lost and weak as a convalescent trying to walk alone after months in bed.

The children felt my abstraction and, stimulated by the nearness of the holidays, got away with murder all morning. Just before recess the whole situation erupted. Marsha suddenly threw herself across the aisle at Stacy and Bob who had been teasing her. She hit Stacy over the head with a jigsaw puzzle, then she dumped her brand-new box of 36 crayolas over Bob's astonished head and jumped up and down on the resultant mess, screaming at the top of her voice.

Awed by the size and scope of the demonstration, the rest of the class sat rigid in their seats. A red crayola projected from the back of the neck of Bob's T-shirt and Stacy, too astonished to cry, sat looking down at a lap full of jigsaw pieces.

I gathered up the shrieking board-stiff Marsha and dismissed the class, apprehensive row by apprehensive row, then I sat down on the little green bench and doubled Marsha forcibly to a sitting position on my lap. I rocked her rebellious head against my sweatered shoulder until her screams became sobs and her flailing feet drooped laxly against my skirt. I pressed her head closer and bent my cheek to her hair.

"There, there, Marsha. There, there." I rocked back and forth. "What's the matter, honey-one, what's the matter?"

Her sobs were hiccoughy gasps now. "Nobody likes me. Everybody's mean. I hate everybody." Her voice rose to a wail.

"No, you don't, Marsha. You don't hate anybody. Is it about Loo Ree?"

Her sobs cut off abruptly. Then she was writhing in my arms again, her voice rising hysterically.

"Marsha!" I shook her, with no effect, so I turned her over briskly and spatted her good and hard a couple of times across her thighs just below her brief skirts, then turned her back into my arms.

She burrowed into my shoulder, her two arms hugging one of mine tight.

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"Loo Ree's gone away," she sobbed.

"I know," I said, and one of my tears fell on her tumbled hair. "She was my friend, too. I feel bad, too."

Marsha knuckled her eyes with one hand.

"She was my most special friend, and she went away."

"She had to go," I soothed. "She was so special she couldn't stay."

"But I didn't want her to go," cried Marsha.

"Neither did I," I patted her back.

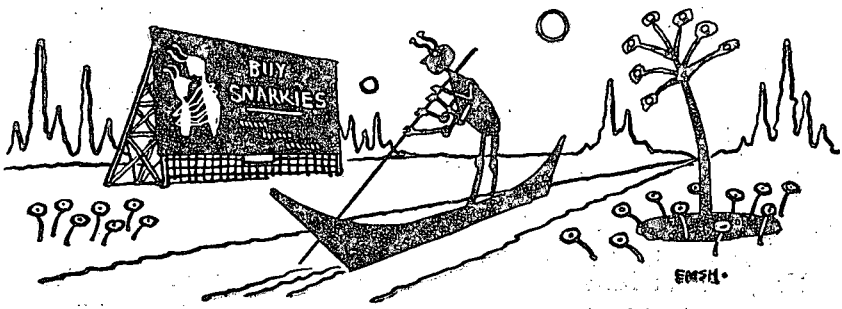
"She told me lotsa stories." Marsha struggled to a sitting position. "She showed me pretty things. She loved me."

"Yes, she loved us. And just think, we can remember her all our lives. When you grow up, you can tell your children all about her."

"I'll tell them all about her," sighed Marsha, leaning against me and shutting her eyes. "When I grow up."

"When you grow up," I whispered, looking past her head and through the school room wall out into the troubled world. "When you grow up."

I hugged her head to me tight and listened and listened for the creak of a changing balance wondering, with a catch in my heart for all the Marshas and Bobs and their growing up, Which way is it tipping?

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*Chad Oliver's first book,* MISTS OF DAWN *(Winston, 1952), detailed the exciting and plausible adventures of a boy who journeyed back through time to the Cro-Magnon era. Not the least of the novel's many charms was a sensitive passage describing a primitive artist at work, creating those cave paintings which were among the first of man's cultural treasures. Now Mr. Oliver describes the creation of a contemporary artist, the Hollywood producer. If harsher critics have described the work of this latter as also being neolithic, it cannot be denied that it is at the same time distinguished by Realism and Scientific Accuracy. Why, if Hollywood ever sends a production unit to the moon . . .*

# *Technical Advisor*

*by* CHAD OLIVER

GILBERT WEBSTER, slouched down in a soft chair at the conference table, radiated a distinctly fluid impression that he was on the verge of cascading away into a puddle on the rug. His long, thin face wore a funereal air, as though he were perpetually preoccupied with World Problems. As a matter of strictly objective fact, however, he happened to be thinking about his incipient ulcer.

"You are not a corpse, Webster," stated the patient voice of Daniel Purdy Bell. "Let's sit up and play Man."

Webster flowed into a more orthodox posture and cocked an eyebrow at the producer. "Whom are we impressing today, Purdy? If it's the League again, I left my Eagle Scout badge in the washroom —"

"Don't play dumb, Webster. Just be yourself. Dee Newton is due here any minute." Purdy Bell paused significantly. "*Dr.* Newton has a Ph.D."

"Oh, *Dr.* Newton!" exclaimed Webster in awed tones. "Is he bringing his gravity with him?"

Bell sighed. "Brief him," he told Cecil Kelley, the director.

"Technical advisor on the science fiction deal," Kelley explained shortly. "Physicist. Used to write the stuff. Won't interfere with your script except for the science angle —"

"Never mind, Cecil," Webster interrupted, lifting his hands in surrender. "I was only kidding — you know, a joke. Like in an egg."

Cecil Kelley shot him a look reserved for subspecies.



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"It's no joking matter, Gil," said Purdy Bell, his face very tanned under his snow-white hair. "In this business you've got to keep up with the times. Science fiction is big right now, and it's going to get bigger. You can't pass off fool's gold for the genuine article, not today. People know too much. *Valley of the Moon* has got my name on it, and it's going to be Scientifically Accurate right down the line from Atom to Zygote. That's what Newton is for — nice Joe, too; speaks English, got his feet firmly on the ground. . . ."

The buzzer on the table burped apologetically and Bell flipped a switch.

"Dr. Dee Newton, sir," announced a voice like distilled honey.

"Send him in," said Purdy Bell.

Dee Newton didn't look like a scientist. Of course, Gilbert Webster admitted to himself, such a thought raised the question of just what a scientist *did* look like. No doubt they came in all sizes, like Space Cadet hats. Nevertheless, they shouldn't, somehow, look like Dee Newton. Newton was a rotund, cherubic little man, nattily dressed, who seemed to be bubbling with silent laughter that percolated just below the surface. Webster liked him on sight.

"I'm not the man to waste words, Dr. Newton," said Purdy Bell when the introductions had been completed. "I'll run through the broad outline of *Valley* and you see what you think of it. Remember, what we're after is Scientific Accuracy — you don't have to pull any punches for *us*."

"Fine," beamed Dr. Newton, obviously pleased. "Admirable."

"Here's the set-up: *Valley* is going to be class, in color, with a good, sound story of a misunderstood guy who finds both himself and the girl he loves in the dark reaches of Outer Space." Purdy Bell paused, in deference to Infinity. "Two ships have already reached the moon, you see, but have not been heard of since they landed. Something happened to them *after* they got there. This film deals with the Third Flight, sent by the U. S. Army to find out what happened to them."

"Martians, of course," chuckled Dee Newton.

"Of course," agreed Purdy Bell. "What else? There's no air on the moon — as I guess you know, Newton — so that rules out any moon people. Accuracy! That's what this business needs more of."

"Agreed," said Dee Newton, lighting up a virulent black cigar.

"Yes," said Purdy Bell. "Now — it all starts off with a bang, to hook the audience right from the beginning. This third job barely clears into Outer Space when she runs smack into trouble with a capital T — a blazing meteor swarm, great in Technicolor. The ship twists and turns, piloted by this guy nobody thinks is any good, and just barely manages to. . . ."

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"Whoa," objected Dee Newton, waving his cigar like a fiery sword. "That won't do, I'm afraid."

"Something — ummm — wrong?"

"You might say that, yes. In the first place, Purdy, the chances of running into a meteor swarm in space between here and the moon are almost zero — the ship has a better chance of getting smacked on the noggin than you would have in your own back yard, but not much. And if the meteors *did* happen to be around, they wouldn't be blazing in a vacuum. No friction. In the second place, that's not a World War I Spad you're flying out there — it's a spaceship, jet-controlled. You'd do well to curve it in an arc at all in that short a time, much less do stunts in it."

"Hmmm," observed Purdy Bell. "Well, that's what we want — Accuracy! I tell you — suppose we cut it down to *one* meteor, just sort of glowing, and blast it out of the way. No fancy rays, of course; just some sort of radar-directed artillery —"

"No dice." Dee Newton smiled sadly. "At those speeds you couldn't hit the Empire State Building with a howitzer. Why not just forget the meteors?"

"No can do." Purdy Bell got to his feet and began pacing the room, the eyes of the three men following him like spectators at a tennis match. He jabbed his finger, six-gun fashion, at Newton. "That meteor may be just a chunk of rock to you, but to me it's Visual Appeal. Man versus the Unknown — in terms that the dumbest popcorn chewer in the third balcony can sink his teeth into, and no pun intended. The meteor stays in."

"You said you wanted accuracy," the physicist shrugged. "I've nothing against space opera, God knows — used to write it myself — but I don't see why it can't be *realistic*."

"Well," said Purdy Bell, "we'll see."

Gilbert Webster smiled sourly. Purdy had *meteor* written all over him in indelible letters a foot high. Webster went back to thinking about his ulcer while Newton and Bell haggled over the costs of technical accuracy on sets, and then jerked back to attentiveness when Newton shot off on a new tangent.

"Look here, Purdy," Dee Newton said, banging his pudgy fist on the polished table. "Don't you realize that space travel is almost in our grasp today? You can't just throw a fake set together on chicken feed and get by with it. These things cost money."

"I am aware of that," Purdy Bell assured him. "But I'm not in the gambling racket; an investment has to show returns. This business of building these fantastic sets over and over again. . . ."

"Wait a minute," Dee Newton breathed, bouncing to his feet and stand-

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ing there stock-still. "Wait — a — minute. Why do we *have* to go on faking these shots and rebuilding our sets? *Why?*"

"Ummm? I don't quite follow you."

Newton sat down again and leaned forward intently, eyes flashing with excitement. "Look here," he said. "How would you like to clear about 15,000,000 bucks on this picture?"

Purdy Bell smiled tolerantly.

"Look," Newton persisted. "Dammit, can't you see? I said that space travel is almost within our grasp, and it *is*. What it lacks is financing. Now, the government doesn't seem to be pushing it — and what's the other source of bigtime financing?" He paused, then answered his own question: "Hollywood."

Purdy Bell's smiled vanished. "You mean —"

"Exactly." Newton was breathing very fast now, his hands shaking. "You give me $4,000,000 and *we can go to the moon and shoot the picture there.* We can keep it strictly hush-hush; the very first shots of the moon will be in *your* picture!"

"Four million dollars . . ."

"Million shmillion! Purdy, I thought you were a businessman. Why, man, you'll get the biggest audience in history — an exhibitors paradise — it can't miss. Don't you understand? *It can't miss!*"

"You mean — film it on location," faltered Purdy Bell.

"On the *moon*," amplified Cecil Kelley.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Gilbert Webster.

One year later, a toy in fairyland, the ship rode a tongue of white flame into space. Ahead of her, waiting, hung the moon.

Gilbert Webster surveyed the interior of the club room with quiet satisfaction. Comfortable modern chairs and couches in a soft pattern of contrasting greens were arranged snugly in the chamber and a neat chromium bar functioned against the far wall. There were no windows. The air was fresh and clean, vaguely pine-scented, and a green light set into a black check panel signified that the automatic pilot had everything under control.

Dee Newton smiled, anticipating his thoughts. "It's real," he said.

Webster shook his head. "I *knew* that space travel was a possibility," he said, downing the last of his scotch and ice. "I believed in it, have for years. But it all went off with such precision, such clockwork! And artificial gravity and everything — more like a luxury liner than a pioneering vessel —"

Dee Newton puffed happily on his cigar. "That's one thing about a spaceship," he pointed out. "Either it works or it doesn't and there just isn't much in between. Why be uncomfortable when you don't have to be? I

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just used what knowledge I had, cut a corner or two with some notions of my own, and there you are — or more precisely, *here* we are. The ship is a bit unorthodox in some respects, but what's the difference?"

Gilbert Webster looked at the soft green wall that stood between him and nothing. "I've got to hand it to you, Dee." He paused. "*Dee* — I've been meaning to ask you about that name. Where'd it come from?"

The physicist hesitated, chewing on his cigar. "Long story, Gil," he said apologetically. "I'll try to cut it short. The D was originally short for Danton, and I always sort of felt like a fugitive from the French Revolution. Never could keep Danton and Robespierre straight anyhow, and the D just naturally evolved into *Dee*, which same I am stuck with." He smiled engagingly. "One of those things."

Cecil Kelley stuck his head into the club room then, and Webster was surprised to note the flush of enthusiasm on the director's face. Around the studios, it was legendary that Kelley hadn't really been impressed with a picture since *Gunga Din*, and before that there was a gap that ran all the way back to Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*.

"Shooting in the control room," he advised them. "Come kibitz."

Dee Newton bounded to his feet, hot on the trail of technical flaws. Gilbert Webster uncoiled himself more slowly, not entirely elated at the prospect of hearing his own dialogue mouthed by Linda Lambeth and the current bobbysox dreamboats. In the best of times, trying to construct a workable script from one of Purdy Bell's "outlines" was not his idea of Paradise.

He followed the two men out of the club room and through a narrow metal corridor. It was hard to believe, in the cozy club room, that you were thousands upon thousands of miles in the middle of nowhere. Here, with the great emptiness whispering from the walls and the vertigo tugging at your stomach, it was different.

You didn't doubt it here.

The control room was buzzing with activity. A sound effects crew had switched on a transcription of a screaming jet, which was intended to represent the noise of an atomic drive, inasmuch as the actual drive devised by Newton was unimpressively subdued. Prop men had already fitted a dummy instrument panel over the real controls, in order to supply the thumping relays, knife switches, rheostats, knobs, buttons, televiewers, spark gaps, and multi-colored flashing lights that were conspicuously lacking in the genuine article.

Webster shook his head. Purdy Bell — who had judiciously elected to cheer them on from the safety of Mother Earth — even had to fake the real

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thing in the interests of Scientific Accuracy, which was an interesting exercise in semantics. But it was understandable enough, and Purdy *did* know his business, and had a private bank to prove it. It was just that he knew science in the same way that he knew Roman history — he had made a picture about it once. When Webster had ventured to suggest to him that perhaps Nero had not set fire to Rome at all, but had in fact been busily engaged in trying to put it *out*, Purdy had almost had him banished for heresy.

Dee Newton looked daggers at the phony control panel and waved his cigar at Webster. "Why can't they play it straight?" he demanded. "They've got such a wonderful opportunity; this idiocy isn't *needed*."

"The popcorn all tastes the same, you know," said Gilbert Webster. "Sometimes I wonder why I don't just open the airlock door and step outside."

"There's no air out there, darling," protested Linda Lambeth, overhearing the last part of Webster's remark. "You couldn't breathe."

"That's the idea," Webster replied, watching her fluttering eyebrows without interest. Linda was a beautiful woman, by Hollywood standards, but a few years past her prime and beginning to acquire a certain desperate glamour. She had been written into the script on Purdy's orders; she was the lovely female reporter in love with The Guy That Nobody Understood. Webster had had nightmares visualizing a Purdy Bell Special in which Linda bathed in Martian goat's milk, but the great man had spared him that final *coup de grâce*.

Kelley clapped his hands together for order. "Okay," he said. "Let's take that discovery scene and let's get it right. This is a take."

The room cleared as if by magic, and Gilbert Webster found himself seated on the sidelines next to Dee Newton. He relaxed, taking a secret satisfaction in the fact that his body was able to assume positions never intended for the human organism, and settled back to watch. The alchemy of drama never failed to fascinate him, even though the raw product you saw with your eyes was by no means what would later appear on the screen replete with music and special effects. There was silence now, except for the toned-down whistle of the pseudo-atomics. Four men and Linda Lambeth took their places on the set. The men, for some obscure reason no doubt connected with Visual Appeal, had shapeless flour sack garments over the top halves of their uniforms — Purdy presumably remembered *Dawn Patrol* and wanted to protect his actors from flying oil. Linda was in a neat correspondent's uniform, as befitted a young girl reporter going to the moon.

"Okay, now," said Cecil Kelley. "You've just spotted it on the view-

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screen. *React!* Don't just stand there. You're up against the Unknown, your lives depending on a guy you have no confidence in. Set? Action . . ."

Shadows blanketed the control room with crisscrosses of anxiety. Frosted stars swam in a deep black viewscreen. Somewhere, a high-toned radar *beep* whistled insistently at electronic intervals that were drawing inexorably closer together. A lieutenant, his face haggard, sank down next to the pilot.

"It's no use," he said flatly. "The computer doesn't *make* mistakes."

Linda registered Fear.

"That does it," said the gray-haired colonel, crumpling a chart into a wad in his fist. He shot a despairing look at the pilot. "To come all this way and then to . . ."

"If only we could *do* something," breathed Linda Lambeth. "I don't understand — why must we just sit here and take it? *Why do we have to die?*"

"Extended parabola of the space-time coordinates," the old colonel explained rapidly. "There's only one man who could get us out of this alive." He looked at the pilot. "And *he* doesn't happen to be with us."

For a long moment, the pilot did not speak. Then, slowly, he lit a cigarette. His voice was steady in the hum of the atomics. "Stand by for turnover," the pilot said.

The *beeps* from the radar came faster and faster.

"But the *orbits*," protested the lieutenant. "It's a *collision* orbit."

"Stand by," the pilot said.

"You — you haven't got a chance," whispered the old colonel.

"He'll do it," gritted Linda Lambeth. "He'll *do* it."

The radar *beeps* coalesced into a keening whine.

"Steady," said the pilot. "Look out, meteor — here we come!"

The atomics erupted into a rising roar.

"Cut!" yelled Cecil Kelley. "That's fine."

"Come on," said Gilbert Webster. "Let's have another drink." Why couldn't they be just a little more realistic? What harm could it do?

"The fate of the artist, my boy," Dee Newton said, reading his mind. "The fate of the artist."

The ship's forward braking jets flared into atomic life. The cold face of the moon watched them come, impassively. Staring into the viewscreen, Gilbert Webster filled his eyes with what he saw.

"How long?" he asked quietly.

"Soon, my friend," said Dee Newton. "Very soon."

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"Just think," gushed Linda Lambeth, "we're going to land on the *moon*."

"Someone should really say something appropriate," an actor said, in sepulchral tones that hinted he was just the right fellow for the job. "This is a momentous occasion in the long history of mankind, an occasion which I feel sure will . . ."

Gilbert Webster nudged Newton and together they slipped away from the voice, retiring to the bar where they could not hear. Newton excused himself and headed for the control room. Webster was alone, and it was just as well. There are some moments that cannot be shared.

Webster's heart pounded with a clean excitement he hadn't known since he was a youngster in Vermont. They would have to land a camera crew first, of course, and then the ship would have to take off and land again, in order to get pictures of the landing. It would consume a lot of fuel, but Newton said that their supply would be sufficient.

There was no sensation of discomfort. The moon filled the screen. . . .

Webster tensed himself. Soon — very soon — man would be on the moon. And all because of a space opera! *Space operas or wars*, he said to himself. *One or the other. You pays your money and you takes your choice.*

There was a low whine and a sudden thump.

Silence.

The ship had landed.

The door of the airlock clamped shut behind him. Gilbert Webster felt the cold silence of the moon press down on him, sealing him in. It made him feel oddly heavy, despite the slight gravity. The five men of the camera crew, standing uncertainly with their equipment, were grotesque caricatures of life — living jokes stuffed in spacesuits and turned loose on the moon.

"I don't know about the rest of you," he said aloud, "but I'm scared stiff."

"Man's first words on the moon!" one of the cameramen chuckled. "Take that down for posterity."

"Nothing to worry about," Dee Newton's voice rasped in his earphones. Newton was handling the initial landing party, while Kelley directed the actors for the ship landing, inasmuch as this end of things was purely a technical one. "Come on — we've got fifteen minutes to clear the blast area."

Webster followed the squat figure across the desolate lunar plain. He had a sudden impulse to reach up and touch the stars, so near did they seem. Stars, brushing his fingertips. . . .

Walking was a pleasure in the light gravity and the men had no trouble carrying equipment that would have broken their backs on Earth. Looking

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back, Webster could see that the ship that had carried them between the worlds had already dwindled against the close lunar horizon.

"Okay," said the physicist finally. "Let's get setup — we don't want to miss this."

Webster checked his special suit watch. Five minutes to go. Newton had adjusted the automatic controls to lift the ship off the moon and bring her back again after an interval of half an hour. Nothing, he said, could possibly go wrong. Still, Webster worried. It would be disconcerting, to say the least, if the ship failed to return.

Thirty seconds.

"Okay," said Dee Newton. "Start the cameras."

The special cameras went into action as the crews activated the tracking mechanisms. A spot of white flame flickered around the ship's tail and a brief shudder shook the ground. The ship hesitated uncertainly for a moment, and then lifted on a column of fire. The complete absence of any sound at all gave Webster the creeps; it was like watching a silent film of Niagara, with tons upon tons of foaming water crashing down on the black rocks below, without a murmur, without a sound.

"What a picture," murmured Gilbert Webster.

"They're tracking her perfectly," said a cameraman's voice.

"Fine," said Dee Newton, and whistled three times into his suit mike. The whistles hurt Webster's ears, and he opened his mouth to protest. Or, rather, he *tried* to.

His mouth wouldn't open.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the cameramen, too, had frozen into immobility. Dee Newton, smiling cheerfully and evidently quite in command of the situation, balanced himself comfortably in his bulky spacesuit and began to hum *How High the Moon*, with bop interpolations.

Somewhere in space, the ship from Earth began her slow turnover for the return to the moon.

Within minutes, circular vehicles running on tractor treads came crunching over the rocks and whisked silently up to their position. Gilbert Webster just stared, unable to move a muscle, feeling like the man who casually dug up a live dinosaur out of his backyard. The machines stopped and spacesuited figures clambered out briskly. Webster could see distinctly red features on the faces behind the plastiglass helmets. His stomach took a long dive into nowhere.

It just couldn't be, his mind illogically insisted. Not his own plot, the oldest chestnut in the business, really *happening*. It was like finding a banker actually trying to poison a waterhole in Texas. It couldn't be —

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But it emphatically was.

What was it that Newton had said so long ago? "*Martians, of course.*"

A confused jumble of thoughts chimed through his brain. So the Martians were telepathic — naturally. They *would* be. Webster wasn't surprised. Nothing surprised him any more.

*Congratulations, Dee!*

*Stupid fools, most of them. Never suspected. . . .*

*Wonderful!*

Newton waved at Webster and grinned. "Degrading business, this space opera," he said aloud. "But think of it — a really new twist at last! *A space opera with real live Earthmen in it!*"

Webster felt very ill.

"Don't worry, my friend," Newton said, reading his thoughts again. "I have plans for you, lad — big plans. I want accuracy in my pictures, and I like you. You've spent your whole life on Earth, while I only skimmed the surface. I want you for my technical advisor later — you won't be harmed, I assure you. We'll do 'em up brown together!"

*Here she comes*, the telepathy resumed. *Remember, no killing; We want no trouble with the SPCA. Stick to the paralysis, and we can use them all over again in other pictures.*

Linda Lambeth would be in heaven, Webster thought irrelevantly. One of the seven human women on Mars . . .

The ship from Earth eased down on her stern jets and settled on the lunar plain. The airlock door swung open. As indicated by Webster's own script, spacesuited figures clambered down a metal ladder, brandishing phony ray pistols in their gloved hands.

The Martian cameras worked feverishly. Webster wanted to groan, but couldn't.

"Rich, rich!" bubbled Dee Newton. "This is rich!"

Webster had to admit that it was. The Martian actors launched themselves from the rocks and advanced across the moon's surface, their paralysis beams mowing down the Earthmen like scythes going through wheat.

It was beautiful.

Webster took it all in, and was surprised to find that he felt quite good. Happy, even. It wouldn't be so bad, really. Technical advisor for a Martian film company, working under a stickler for accuracy like Newton! What if he was a Martian — Webster wasn't prejudiced, and it might even be a chance to do the job right at last. Webster didn't much care who the job was done *for*. Idly, he wondered how Ray Bradbury would go over with the Martians, and the more he thought about it the better he liked the idea.

"They can't be any worse than people," he thought cheerfully, and

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when they released him to walk he followed the Martians willingly to their ship.

It was one year later and it felt like ten.

Gilbert Webster surveyed the set of *Down To Earth* with a feeling of horror. Dee waddled up, a rather globular mass of reddish protoplasm in his native state, and Webster grabbed him in dismay.

"But my God, Dee!" he exploded. "You say you want accuracy, and then you have your women going around New York with bare breasts. Civilized women haven't done that since Crete!"

The thing that had been Dee Newton smiled sadly. "I know, dear boy," he said with infinite patience. "It isn't *quite* strictly accurate, but what can I do? The audience knows that these people are supposed to be mammals, and how else can I show it in dramatic visual terms?"

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## *Coming . . . in our next issue (on sale in early February) . . .*

*THE OTHER INAUGURATION*, wherein that one-time precinct worker, Anthony Boucher, observes what might happen if one could switch election results by the use of a time machine;

*THIRSTY GOD*, a grim warning to those too curious about the religions of other planets by that mistress of mood writing, Idris Seabright;

*ABLE TO ZEBRA*, by Wilson Tucker, whose researches in the nature of science fiction, time travel and kindred matters have led him to some outrageous conclusions;

*plus . . .*

stories by Richard Matheson and Manly Wade Wellman, a new Ransom and MacTate adventure, by H. Nearing, Jr., and others.

*Special added feature . . .*

As enthusiastic Chesley Bonestell fans (and who isn't one?), we have long brooded unhappily over the necessity for superimposing assorted type-matter on Mr. Bonestell's superb cover art. Now we think we have found a solution — next month we shall reproduce the fine new painting we have from Mr. Bonestell on both front and back covers, and on the back cover there will be no type whatsoever! This idea has been suggested by more than one reader; we hope that all of you will be as pleased by it as we are.

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*With the same quiet understatement that underlined the terror in his* Miss Frost *(F&SF, April 1951) Mr. Wood tells the grim tale of Norman, who passed most of his life in seeking an Enemy. It was not a quest that made for a quiet, or pleasing life. And, as Mr. Wood dispassionately reports, the search itself is never of such vital import as the ultimate identification.*

# The Enemy

*by* CHRISTOPHER WOOD

THE ENEMY first manifested himself as something under the chair. The chair had a cane seat with holes in it, and Norman was sitting on it in his earliest nightmare. He knew that the Enemy was trying to get at him through the holes even though there was nothing to be seen. He was only just over four, and he was not seriously alarmed.

The nightmare repeated itself at odd intervals; and then, about a year later, he dreamed that the Enemy was under the bed. This was too close at hand. His bed was his castle. The Enemy was disturbingly strange . . . but wasn't there something he could do about it? In recalling the dream it seemed to Norman that he climbed out on to the floor. In any case a truce must have been arranged, for he had no nightmare for more than two years.

By this time he was seven and the outside world had taken definite shape. Among its more pleasant furnishings, ready always to amuse, instruct, or comfort, was his governess Miss Martin. She was devoted to Norman, and, in his way, he loved her. Perhaps that was why he was apt to scream at her so furiously as she picked him up if he fell and grazed a knee. She was all he had, for his father, still grieving over the death at childbirth of Norman's mother, was a dim figure, chiefly notable for a regrettable tendency to play with Norman's toys.

The new recurring nightmare was more elaborate and much more frightening. Norman would dream that he was standing at the window watching the evening shadows creep across the lawn. He knew that something was wrong. The shadows seemed to take shape, become menacing. Soon they were all about the house. Trembling with fear, he could not take his eyes off them as they pressed against the window panes. Then a loud rap sounded on the garden door. Though he knew it was the Enemy he found himself



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compelled to go and slide back the bolt. With horror and fascination he watched the door begin to open. And then he was awake and crying for Marty. Miss Martin would come hurrying in to stay with him till he fell asleep again. At such times he loved her very much.

Then he discovered that if, in the initial part of the dream, he realized that he was asleep he could awaken himself by calling for Marty. But no sooner had he learned to do this than his mind took a new twist. Like a neurotic with an illness he began to be morbidly interested in the Enemy. Who was he? What did he look like? The dream was terrifying, but viewed from the safety of mid-afternoon sunshine he was brave enough to wish that it would go on a little longer — just until the Enemy came round the door and disclosed himself. Indeed he became quite cross when he'd awoken before the crisis by cravenly calling for Marty.

It was only a step further to think of Marty as standing in his way. He couldn't quite stifle a feeling that it was treachery. But the Enemy was becoming an obsession and other considerations seemed unimportant.

Miss Martin had at length to admit that something was wrong. She was a sensible woman. Willingly had she put up with his occasional kicks knowing that she had his affection and confidence. But now he seemed to be disappearing into himself, and all she received was cold looks. If she could have taken a firm line she might have succeeded in making him tell her what was the matter. But the fear of losing him was too much for her resolution.

"Why are you always mooning about as though you were in a dream, Norman?" she weakly asked one day. "I might as well not exist. Don't you love me any more?"

Not yet quite capable of the ultimate betrayal he turned his head away and would not answer. She was good — he loved her, and needed her. But compared to the Enemy she just wasn't real.

That night before he went to sleep Marty, as she sometimes did, read a fairy story to him. He found the genie in the bottle utterly fascinating. Of course he must have one. When the light was put out he was busy considering the bottles in the house. None of them seemed likely to contain a genie. He'd start looking about next day. . . .

He was dropping off to sleep when a very exciting idea brought him wide awake again. Suppose he were the bottle; and the Enemy the genie! The more he thought about it the more likely it seemed. It just *had* to be true. He had only to say the magic word and all the wonders of the world would be at his command! But he'd have to see the Enemy first — genie, he hastily corrected himself. It was no good talking to somebody you couldn't see. Really, that old Marty — if she weren't there. . . Incidentally, he'd have to think of a name for the genie. Enemy wasn't very flattering.

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Next morning he knew at once that it was one of those days when there was something special to look forward to. And then, like a bombshell, *the* name came. So simple, so exactly right — for wasn't Marty the opposite of what he wanted? And what was the opposite of Marty? Ytram. A name of mystery, like a spell . . . He leapt out of bed.

"Ytram, Ytram," he chanted, dancing round the room in his excitement.

"Have you gone quite dotty?" Marty asked, coming into the room smiling, happy to see him in such high spirits for a change.

"Wouldn't you like to know! Wouldn't you just!" he said, running up to her and giving her a hug. She was harmless now — he knew it.

But when several nights went by in apparently dreamless sleep he changed his mind. Marty would have to go. That must be what Ytram was waiting for. God was a jealous God, the Bible said. . . .

He began a campaign of hardly speaking. Soon the wretched woman was in despair. Sometimes when he saw the look on her face he wanted to break down and tell her everything. But he hardened his heart. After a few days he even began to take pleasure in her misery.

The end came on his birthday. Marty had saved up and bought him an expensive clockwork motorcar which he had long coveted in the toyshop window. He woke up nervous and cross after another dreamless night to find a package on the end of the bed — "To Norman on his eighth birthday with much love from Marty." He guessed at once what it was. With trembling fingers he unwrapped it. As he held the car in his hands he knew that he was in a terrible muddle. She was such a darling to get it for him. Only — something was stopping him from dreaming about Ytram. Had he made up a lot of nonsense about a horrid old nightmare? Or was he being trapped by a kind of bribe? Must he, like Abraham, make a sacrifice for the sake of Ytram?

It was unfortunate that Marty should have chosen that particular moment to go and see if he were awake.

"Back from dreamland?" she said, a pleasant nervousness at seeing her gift in his hand making her coy.

She was laughing at him — she must be. He began to be angry. It made him feel strong — strong enough for the supreme sacrifice.

"You know very well I'm not — oh, it's mean of you!"

His voice rose to a scream: "Here, take your beastly present — I don't want it."

With all his force he threw the precious car at her. Missing her it shattered to pieces against the wall.

Aghast at himself he stared at her. He longed to run and ask to be forgiven. But his curiously pleasant anger held him in a vice.

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Miss Martin's face collapsed and grew old. Speechless she stared back at him. She'd been so hoping the little toy would bring him back to her. What a fool! The reaction was terrible. How could he be so cruel! The last week had been like a nightmare. And now this! She couldn't stand any more. Without a word she turned and stumbled from the room.

Left to himself Norman couldn't think what had made him behave like that. It was as though someone else had taken his arm and thrown the toy. But Marty'd be back in a moment and then everything would be all right.

Tears began to press against his eyelids. And as the minutes went by and no Marty came he began to howl in earnest.

It seemed a very long time later that the door opened and his father came into the room.

"Young man, I hope you're ashamed of yourself. I ought to give you a good hiding. Treating poor Miss Martin like that! She insisted on leaving at once . . . Well, haven't you anything to say for yourself?"

His father was looking at him so coldly, as though he were nothing more than a kind of nuisance.

"I — I'm sorry, father. Isn't Marty *ever* coming back?" he said in a flat little voice.

"No, she isn't. And as for you, you'll have plenty of time to think about your birthday behavior up here for the rest of the day."

There was indeed plenty of time to realize that he'd sent away the one person to whom he mattered — to feel utterly wretched — and later, having made certain the car was broken beyond repair, to try and persuade himself that Ytram, at least, remained. For the day seemed interminable.

When at last it was time to go to bed sleep was a long time coming. It must have been nearly morning when, at last dreaming, he seemed to sink down to an unknown depth where he very soon became frightened. He was in a dimly lit corridor and it was urgently necessary to escape. As he started to run, panic overcame him. The corridor seemed endless; it twisted and turned, and always something behind him came nearer and nearer. But the unbearable climax was to discover, on turning a corner, that he must have been running in the wrong direction. For there, confronting him, was the Enemy. In a terrifying second he understood that there never had been any genie-like Ytram. Only, and always, the Enemy. In that instant every detail was etched on his mind so that he never could forget the misshapen, grotesquely fat figure which darkly loomed above him, its hideous face leering, one arm upraised. Then he was awake, screaming for Marty.

But there was no Marty to come with her warmth to comfort him. There never would be any more. And that, perhaps, was the crowning horror. . . .

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He'd drifted easily, comfortably through school, doing just enough work to pass his examinations, pretending just enough interest in the other boys not to become unpopular. Quite early he'd discovered Rider Haggard in the school library; but despite a great deal of thought, and the most frightful incantations, had not suceeded in gaining any supernatural powers.

He had just left school when, as unnoticeably as he had lived, his father died, leaving him an income large enough to live on. He settled in London, free to do exactly as he liked. What he liked was to live by himself, with plenty of acquaintances to keep him amused. If he became bored, or if they, misled by his charm, tried to come close to him he dropped them. There were always more.

It was between wars and London was a pleasant place in which to live — if you had a little money. So pleasant did he find it that he was nearing 40 before it occurred to him that time was slipping away, and that he was doing exactly nothing with it.

*Tedium vitae* had been growing on him of late and, much as he hated to admit it, evidently pleasure was not enough. Nor was it enough just to read. Following his early bent he had devoured all the books he could find dealing with the supernatural. One or two on Indian mysticism had left him with an uneasy feeling that he ought to do something about them — try some of the exercises, perhaps. Serenity or, though they were highly undesirable, curious powers were said to be obtainable. In either case an alluring prospect. It had made him think of how as a kid he'd played with the idea of magic powers.

He was out walking one afternoon, trying to make up his mind to devote ten minutes a day to meditation, when he met one of his lesser acquaintances. She was a dim woman, much concerned with something called "The Higher Thought."

"How fortunate! You're just the person!" she cooed at him, "Come along with me, I'm on my way to hear a real Swami lecture. My dear, he's marvellous."

"A real Swami?"

"Yes. He's returning to India tomorrow. You simply must come."

The hall was small and stuffy and filled with earnest people whom Norman loathed at sight. But the Swami was a surprise. It was not what he said — Vedanta philosophy was familiar to Norman — but the man himself. Simply dressed in Occidental clothes there was nothing spectacular about him. But a curiously gentle power made him impressive.

At the end of the lecture Norman felt a strong desire to speak to him. And it would be nice for the Swami to know that among these dreary people at least one person really knew what he was talking about!

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With conscious superiority he forced his way into the crowded room backstage.

"Really, these tiresome people!" he thought, "Poor man!"

But when at last they were face to face his assurance was rapidly dissipated. Before he had a chance to say anything the Swami spoke:

"Ah! I see you are dissatisfied. That is to be expected. But for the present I can only tell you that it is absolutely necessary that you discover who the Enemy is and rid yourself of him."

For a moment the words meant nothing. And then, as vividly as ever, the Enemy of his nightmare flashed into his mind. As a boy he'd never been able to enter a dark corridor without half expecting to find the Enemy at the other end. Even now occasionally the old dread would return. Funnily enough the meeting had always seemed somehow necessary. How extremely odd! The man couldn't have known — and yet . . . He'd read of Indian mystics who were said to know all about a person the moment they saw him.

These reflections lasted a bare second or two while he stood with his mouth open in astonishment. They were succeeded by an unaccountably strong resentment which caused him to turn away rudely and march out of the room. He hadn't asked for help! And what curious advice for a holy man to give even if enemies *were* better out of the way! Could the Swami have been making fun of him? He'd fancied he'd heard a silvery laugh as he left the room. . . .

As he strode home his indignation began to leak away. Soon he was feeling curiously as though he'd lost something. Turning into his street it occurred to him that he hadn't the slightest idea why he had become so disproportionately angry. Hadn't he, perhaps, walked away from the chance of a lifetime?

Irresolutely he paused. There was no getting away from it, he had to see the Swami again. But the Swami was leaving for India next day. . . .

He jumped into a taxi and hurried back to the hall. It was closed. Then he realised that he did not know the address of the woman who had taken him to the lecture; nor had there been anybody there he knew. It was maddening! There was nothing to be done — except spend the evening vainly searching for the wretched woman, whom he was beginning to wish he'd never met.

During the next few days he tried to forget the incident. But it kept coming back into his mind with a sense of loss which ended by infuriating him.

It was in this mood of frustration that his childhood's desire for magic returned. This time he had a vague idea what to do. The secret lay in those

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books of Yoga — and in deliberately concentrating on the obtaining of power.

It did not take him long to discover the tiresomeness of breathing exercises and meditation once his first enthusiasm had worn off. At the end of three months he'd had some peculiar nightmares of which he could only recall their oddness and that they concerned some sort of small animal; and, already slim, he had become even thinner. Nervous and irritable he abandoned the attempt.

Wearily he tried to resume his former life. But nothing seemed as much fun as before.

His disillusionment was approaching desperation when one day he found Mr. Marion. Strolling down the Charing Cross road he entered a second hand bookstore which specialised in the occult. Just inside the door he paused as he heard the proprietor talking to someone in the invisible recesses of the shop.

"How about Dunraven's account of his experiences with D. D. Home? Second hand copies of the *Proceedings Of The Psychical Research Society* are rare, you know — to you, Mr. Marion, only two and sixpence."

"No, no," a rather petulant high-pitched voice replied, "I've read it — and anyway there isn't anything Home did that I couldn't do in the old days."

Idle boasting or not, Norman was interested. He advanced into the shop and the owner appeared from behind a bookcase.

"Hallo, Jim!" Norman said and drew him aside. "Who were you talking to?"

"That's Mr. Marion. He used to be a medium; powerful, so I've heard. But something went wrong one day and he got an awful fright. Never tried it since."

"Do you mind introducing me?"

But from the shadows at the back there now emerged the individual in question. Perhaps it was the uncertain light, the corridor-like effect of the bookshelves, and the man's corpulence which instantly suggested to Norman the Enemy.

"This is it," he said to himself, only to add, "But that's ridiculous," a moment later as Mr. Marion came into the light, disclosing a round, pasty face more obsequious than dangerous. He was a man of about 50 and he had much black hair heavily oiled.

"Pleased to meet you," he said, smiling affably as they shook hands.

"I couldn't help overhearing just now," Norman said. "I was most interested."

Mr. Marion's smile faded. But Norman looking at him suddenly knew

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that he was weak and could be easily dominated. With something of the pleasure of a sadistic schoolboy he dragged the unwilling Mr. Marion off to a teashop. There his victim's very evasiveness seemed to indicate that Mr. Marion had something he, Norman, very much wanted — the key to occult power. For it was obvious that he had been very badly frightened.

"But Mr. Marion, I'd be willing to pay a very good fee for one sitting."

Mr. Marion bridled. "It's not that, I *never* took money for a séance. You don't seem to understand — I just don't any longer think it's right. And it can be dangerous." He shivered slightly. "I've got a weak heart anyway. If you're a powerful medium, and I was, you may get into touch with *most* undesirable elements. No, Sir, I couldn't — never again."

Norman wanted to slap him. His obstinacy resembled that of a weak child who nevertheless will not obey. But there must be some approach. . . .

"I didn't mean to offend you," Norman said. "It's just that I want a sitting so very badly. The moment I saw you I felt the power radiating from you."

Gross flattery. But it seemed to work. Mr. Marion waved a deprecating hand and looked pleased. After a moment Norman resumed:

"And of course your sincerity is obvious to anyone . . . I find it hard to believe that you can really be capable of denying your great gift to someone earnestly seeking. . . ."

Norman paused, uncertain how to proceed. Unexpectedly, Mr. Marion came to his rescue.

"Ah, a bereavement! My dear fellow I'm so very sorry; I feel for you. In the old days I gave comfort to many people — so they tell me, for I had no memory of what had taken place during trance."

In that case an innocent little deception should be safe enough. And if Mr. Marion chose to leap to a conclusion. . . .

"I so desperately *want* to believe in survival," Norman said, trying to feel guileless and charming. "It's so difficult — one needs some little scrap of evidence. I know it's selfish of me but couldn't I persuade you? Just one sitting? I'd be so grateful."

For some moments Mr. Marion stroked his chin and looked at Norman.

"I don't know what's come over me — your influence, I suppose. All right, just one sitting. But you must understand that I will not be responsible for anything unpleasant which might happen. I really don't think it will, though — not with you."

Hardly able to conceal his triumph Norman thanked Mr. Marion as humbly as possible and they parted outside the teashop.

Nevertheless he was a little nervous when, two days later, he rang the bell of Mr. Marion's apartment.

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"Ah, my dear boy, I'm all ready for you," Mr. Marion said, taking Norman's arm and guiding him into a largish room in which there was a great deal of pseudo-Oriental bric-a-brac. In the center a small, solid table, with two chairs, stood.

"If you'll sit at this table I'll just draw the shades. There will still be enough light for you to make notes if you wish to. That's right — I'll sit facing you. One thing — when I'm in trance please be careful not to touch me. Oh, and of course encourage any spirits you recognise. Sometimes they speak through me, sometimes directly."

Mr. Marion settled himself and closed his eyes. As Norman listened to the medium's breathing grow deeper he realised that he had no idea of what to expect. He'd blithely hoped that when the moment came he'd know how to capture some of the power and divert it to his own uses. He did not feel so sure of himself now. But what could he lose?

Mr. Marion seemed to have collapsed in his chair and his breathing had become stertorous. Norman could feel a tension in the room. He jumped as some very loud raps sounded from the table. And when a few moments later, with a just perceptible concussion like that of distant gunfire, the whole room appeared to tremble he began to wish himself elsewhere. But that was cowardly. He'd asked for power and here it frighteningly was. If only he knew what to do with it!

A gagging sound came from Mr. Marion's chair. And then some urgent obscenities both startling and horrible. But, with a fusillade of raps on the table as though the speaker were furious at being interrupted, these were abruptly cut off and an authoritative voice said:

"That should not have occurred. The atmosphere is unfavorable. . . ."

Suddenly, as when the telephone wires are crossed and somebody else's conversation cuts in, from a point several feet away from Mr. Marion Norman heard a voice he thought he recognised.

"But he wasn't a *bad* little boy, really he wasn't. I'm so dreadfully worried. Mayn't I please warn him? If the Digger . . . oh!"

It sounded suspiciously as though someone had clapped a hand over her mouth. In any case the line had gone dead.

Dear old Marty! He hadn't behaved very well to her, he seemed to remember. Could it really have been she? What had she been trying to say? And what was the Digger? Of course he didn't take it seriously — but she'd certainly seemed upset.

As the minutes passed he tried to concentrate on what he was there for. Power, he said to himself. But the word had lost its flavor.

Unconsciously pulling the collar of his coat around his neck he realised that it was becoming cold. An icy current of air seemed to be drifting

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gently over his shoulders. Yet the door and the windows were closed, he remembered.

Just then an area of greater darkness in the center of the table caught his eye. As with uneasy curiosity he watched, there slowly rose up out of the surface what looked like a small animal about the size of a monkey. In the dim light it was difficult to see details. Having once emerged it sat up motionless except for the slow waving of what might have been a tail. It was densely black. But what filled Norman with extraordinary repungance were two dully luminous, reddish eyes regarding him fixedly. There was something oafish and malevolent about them. He stood it for a few moments and then, becoming aware of a peculiarly unpleasant odor, his nerve failed him. Giving the table a blow with his fist he shouted, "Go away, go away!"

It vanished instantly and at the same time the medium groaned. As Norman tried to compose himself Mr. Marion gave audible signs of regaining consciousness. Presently he sat up and yawned.

"I don't feel very well," he said, "it always takes it out of me. Would you draw back the shades for me, please? There, that's better — helps bring me back."

He stretched, and yawned again. "Well, did you get what you wanted?"

Norman did not know what to say.

"Someone I was once close to spoke. . . ." he began hesitantly.

"Good. I hope you were encouraging."

"Yes . . . but at the end something rather unpleasant turned up."

He hadn't meant to mention it. But, still filled with disgust, the words escaped him.

Mr. Marion sat up straight. "Oh dear, I was afraid of that. Tell me about it."

Norman described what he had seen — and felt. And he repeated Marty's mention of the Digger. It was only then that it occurred to him that the apparition probably was what she was referring to.

Mr. Marion looked very grave.

"I knew I shouldn't have given in to you . . . It's the same sort of trouble I had last time — only that was really serious."

"But what was the beastly thing I saw?"

"How should I know!" Mr. Marion said crossly. "Just something you let yourself in for."

Norman suspected that Mr. Marion could tell him a great deal more than that if he chose to.

"I don't see what it had to do with me," he said, "after all *you* were the medium."

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"Well, really, the idea! If you must know, it was probably your familiar — and a very unpleasant one! Some people are apt to attach to themselves, without knowing it, a low type of animal, or elemental, life — particularly if they've dabbled in occultism from the wrong motives."

He paused, and then, softening, continued: "Probably you'll be all right, particularly if it's the first time you've seen it. I honestly don't know what a Digger is. Whatever you do, if you see it again be very careful not to pay it any attention. If you ignore it it'll leave you in time. But once try to make use of it and you're sunk!"

Norman looked at him blankly. Was he expected to believe that? It was utterly ridiculous to suppose that a nauseating creature like the Digger could possibly be attached to him! Whereas to a medium who'd been mixed up in God knows what for years. . . .

"Thank you very much for the sitting, Mr. Marion," he said. "If you're sufficiently recovered I'll leave you now."

"Oh, you off now? Take care of yourself, old boy."

Norman could see that Mr. Marion was glad to be rid of him. Well, he was glad to be rid of Mr. Marion. It had been a rather unpleasant experience. He'd caught a glimpse of what he'd wanted and it had been enough to show him that the occult was better left alone. From now on a sane, ordered existence. . . .

It was two days later that he woke up in the morning with a feeling that something was not quite right in his bedroom. Was there perhaps a slight odor which ought not to be there? He sniffed tentatively. Yes, there was an unpleasant smell, vaguely familiar . . . It did not please him to trace it to the Digger; but that was what it resembled. Fortunately, the smell now seemed to have gone. Funny how memory pops up with something just after one's waked up! He dismissed the matter. There were more pleasant things to think about — for instance at 7 o'clock. . . .

But the evening was not a success. The girl, of whom he'd had every expectation, seemed uneasy during dinner. It bothered him that he could not get her to look at him. Finally, as they strolled away from the theatre, she insisted on going straight home. He did not conceal his disappointment.

"I'm awfully sorry, Norman. I thought I liked you a lot when we met. Tonight you seem — different."

"But I can't have changed in five days!"

She looked squarely at him for almost the first time that evening.

"I suppose it's silly — but there's something about you tonight that scares me. . . ." she giggled nervously.

But how idiotic! It was as much as he could do to put her in a taxi and say goodbye politely.

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His nerves were a little on edge as he started to walk home. What a bore the evening had turned out to be! And what a curious excuse to make . . . He stopped, feeling round his neck. No, there was nothing there — it must have been his imagination. Funny how the Digger had kept coming into his mind all day . . . He walked briskly on. He was being as silly as that girl. When he arrived home he took a heavy dose of sleeping pills and went to bed.

It was late next morning when he struggled back to sluggish consciousness. There was a faint suggestion of an all too familiar odor in the room. He groaned. And then it came to him that he had spent the night dreaming of the Digger. But he could only remember two incidents. He was standing in his bedroom near the door. Seated beside his pillow the Digger looked sombrely at him. He looked back at it — he had a very good view. It was black except for its red eyes, and its tail ended in a flat round surface like a spade. As before, the sight of it filled him with disgust. Then he was in a garden. The Digger was sitting on a grassy bank fanning itself with its tail. It rose slightly on its hind legs, the spadelike tail began to vibrate rapidly, and the Digger sank into the ground. At the same time a voice said: "The Digger digs itself down, or up. If you ask it to, it'll dig itself *in*." Inexplicably the words filled him with horror.

There was a knock on the door.

"Your breakfast's getting cold," Mrs. Christy's somewhat alcoholic voice called. She came in each day, cooked breakfast, and cleaned the apartment.

Norman put on a dressing gown and went into the living room.

"You ought to tie it up," Mrs. Christy said. "A person can't be blamed if it escaped." She sniffed.

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Your monkey, or whatever. Soon as I opened the door out it rushed. Didn't 'alf give me a fright! And the smell! I never did like them dirty things."

"Mrs. Christy, I don't feel well this morning. If I hear any more of your imagination I shall quite simply be sick."

"Imagination is it!" Mrs. Christy retired, hooting with indignation.

Damn the Irish and their second sight! Of course it was all nonsense . . . But after breakfast he crept back into the bedroom hardly daring to look at the bed.

He dressed quickly, anxious to get out of the house. As usual the next door cat was sunning itself on its doorstep. As usual he bent down to stroke it. But it leaped to its feet, spitting. And then, in the mysterious way cats have of watching something that isn't there, its eyes slowly swivelled. Then

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it turned and fled. Norman felt like doing the same. Up till now, like one who will not admit the onslaught of some disease until forced to, he'd refused to become alarmed. But, for some reason, the cat's behavior had shaken him even more than Mrs. Christy's.

It was beyond a joke. It was, in fact, a persecution. The thought, tending to substitute anger for fear, comforted him. He would think the matter out over a good lunch.

Fortified by food and drink he sipped his coffee and considered what should be done. Since he could safely disclaim responsibility for so noisome an object as the Digger it must have been put onto him in the familiar witch doctor manner. It was, of course, Mr. Marion's creature, and he must be made to call it off. Horrified when he'd learnt that his discreditable companion had put in an appearance he'd hastened to disavow it and put the blame on Norman. But he'd admitted to having had the same sort of trouble before. Had he perhaps tried to rid himself of the Digger by passing it on to Norman? An unsavory character, that Mr. Marion. At first sight Norman had taken him for the Enemy. . . .

He stiffened in his chair. It was a very unpleasant shock suddenly to have the Swami's words echo in his mind. ". . . absolutely necessary that you find out who the Enemy is — and rid yourself of him." Then he was in some sort of real danger! What a fool he'd been! For of course Mr. Marion *was* the Enemy. He simply must hand the Digger back without delay. But how? Unlike the cat (and Mrs. Christy) he couldn't *see* the damned thing. The only time he had, outside of dreams, was at the séance. That was an idea . . . If Mr. Marion did not guess that Norman suspected him he might be induced to sit once more for a deeply worried individual. At least it was worth trying. He paid the bill and hurried off to Mr. Marion's.

But when he rang the bell it was answered by a grim-looking charwoman. Mr. Marion, it appeared, had not been feeling well and had gone down to Brighton for a few days. Under slight pressure she admitted that letters were to be forwarded to the Grand Hotel.

Norman's disappointment lasted only a moment. Brighton might be a very good idea. He hurried home, packed a bag and was in the train within an hour. He took a room in a small hotel on the front. It seemed a wise precaution to sign the register under an assumed name, though he did not admit to himself just why that should be so. He also preferred not to announce himself to Mr. Marion at the hotel. A coincidence would be more suitable. He would go and sit in the lounge. . . .

It was half past 5 when he chose a chair from which he could watch the elevator. At a little before 6 Mr. Marion appeared looking, Norman thought, very smug.

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"What a surprise!" he said, tapping Mr. Marion on the shoulder. "I just came in to have a cocktail. Come along and have one with me."

Mr. Marion was clearly not pleased.

"Oh . . . er, thank you very much, but. . . ."

"But I shall be dreadfully disappointed if you don't. I've been particularly wanting to see you. We'll just have a quick one. . . ."

Norman took him by the arm and led him firmly to the bar where, once settled at a table in the corner, he went to work on him.

"I know it's an awful lot to ask, specially after you've been so kind, but — I desperately need just one more sitting."

Mr. Marion looked quite aghast.

"My dear chap I couldn't. Really I couldn't. I've been quite unwell since the last one. I had to come down here on account of my health.

"Why on earth do you want one?" he added petulantly.

"You're the only person who can possibly help me. I've followed your advice most carefully and tried to pay no attention to that very unpleasant familiar of mine. Actually, I've not seen the Digger except in a dream. But I know he's there most of the time and — sometimes I can smell him. It's really awful. I'm completely unnerved. I thought if I could have one more sitting the Digger might appear and I might have a chance to get rid of him. You know — pray, make the sign of the cross or something . . . After all, it was at your séance that he first turned up. I can't manage it alone, and I don't *want* to have to tell any other medium about it."

Would the gentle little threat of publicity work? It had been the inspiration of the moment. Norman crossed his fingers.

"Um!" said Mr. Marion after a lengthy silence. "You make it very difficult for me . . . I expect I'm making a mistake, but I suppose I'll have to risk it. It just might work. Shall we say 2 o'clock tomorrow? But please, *please* never ask me again."

Norman's relief was unfeigned. He thanked Mr. Marion profusely and left him. With any luck in a few hours time he'd be free. As for Mr. Marion . . . But, at least at the level of consciousness, the details of what might be going to happen remained dim. When it comes to dirty work it is extraordinary how coöperative the subconscious can be; and how discreet in not announcing its plans beforehand.

After dinner he went for a walk. He felt in high spirits, and if the Digger dogged his footsteps he was perfectly welcome to do so — for one more night.

A long way down the promenade, where Brighton becomes cheaper and gayer, he discovered a large fun fair, and for a couple of hours the noise and the crowds distracted him pleasantly. By the time he had walked back to

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the hotel he was, as he'd hoped, exhausted. He went to bed. And if certain words to do with the ridding oneself of enemies recurred to his mind they did not keep him awake.

But it was a grim Norman that approached the Grand Hotel at a little before 2 next day. The morning had not been pleasant. Filled with vague foreboding Norman had spent it wandering about aimlessly.

As unobtrusively as possible he entered the lounge and waited till the elevator was almost full before taking it up to Mr. Marion's floor. The corridor was empty, and as he knocked on the door he was reasonably sure that he had not been noticed.

"I've been on the verge of calling the séance off," Mr. Marion said, looking at him searchingly. "I have a funny feeling about it. But I've always prided myself on not going back on my word. . . ."

He looked so defenseless as he went to darken the window that for a moment something compassionate stirred in Norman. Could he be making a mistake? And then, the shades drawn, Mr. Marion turned round. In the half light Norman saw him unmistakably as the Enemy.

A table stood ready in the middle of the room and across it Norman watched Mr. Marion going limp in his chair. But this time as his trance deepened his breathing grew rapid and uneven. Every now and again he stirred uneasily and groaned. As time went by and nothing happened Norman found himself shivering. But the icy cold, he knew, was within him.

"Digger, Digger," he whispered.

And then at last a cold current seemed to stir about him. A moment later, fancying he heard something scuttle across the floor behind, he looked over his shoulder. When he turned back the Digger was sitting on the table staring at him.

Now that the time had come it seemed to Norman almost as though somebody else raised an arm and, pointing at Mr. Marion, said in a voice he couldn't quite keep steady: "I command you to go back to him!"

Even as he spoke he knew the words were not the right ones. And then he had it — the voice in the dream.

"Digger — dig *in*," he said quietly, yet with all his will.

Slowly the Digger turned to face Mr. Marion. Then, with a loathsome slobbering sound, it precipitated itself upon him. Its front paws seemed to grip Mr. Marion's shoulders while the spade-tail started to vibrate. Norman heard a ghastly struggle for breath as Mr. Marion writhed in his chair. Suddenly he collapsed, and as he did so the Digger was gone.

"My God!" Norman whispered.

For some minutes he sat still, frozen with horror. Then he got up and

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pulled back the shades. It took considerable resolution to turn round and look at Mr. Marion. But he saw at once that his worst fear had been unfounded — there was no wound to be seen. Nor, curiously enough, was Mr. Marion's face anything but peaceful. With mounting relief Norman went over and made a quick examination. Unquestionably Mr. Marion was dead. For a moment Norman stook looking at him.

"He said he had a weak heart." Unconsciously he spoke the words aloud.

But there was no time to waste. He must get out of the hotel without being noticed. Nobody in the corridor — down the stairs, as though he'd come from the second floor — through the crowded lounge and into the street.

Thank goodness it was over with. Now all he had to do was go home. But first a walk to take the bad taste away. Because it had been — horrible.

With each step in the sunny, clear air his spirits rose. Actually it couldn't have been better. He was free of the Digger; and his enemy, *the* Enemy, was dead (of a heart attack). The Swami had been the real thing. And now his advice had been carried out — as much by providence as anything else.

It was such a lovely day. The 6 o'clock train would get him home in time for dinner. It was only 3 now. Why not another stroll round the amusement park? He'd had so much fun the night before. He stopped a taxi and rode down.

In mid-afternoon it was even more crowded and Norman entered with a sense of mounting excitement which rather surprised him. Perhaps, for the moment, his point of view had been thrown a little out of focus, for he felt as though he were stepping onto a stage. The crowds were repeating, for the millionth time, a play which would never have a last performance. He was the invisible spectator. Everything else was make-believe — the barkers shouting outside the concessions, the supercilious policeman twisting his handlebar moustaches under the sign which read "Beware of pickpockets." Through this lavish production he picked his way delicately with the tolerant affection of a puppet master for his puppets.

Suddenly his ears caught a sound he had not heard for years; the unmistakable high-pitched squeaking of a Punch and Judy show. He'd always loved them. He turned. There it was, the tall booth, the stick being wielded, the cries, and the dog in the corner. He stood at the edge of the crowd, watching with a pleasant nostalgia the ancient play.

But after a little he decided that this must be a new version, for wasn't that another figure in the corner opposite the dog? He edged closer. And then his heart gave a horrid jump. Perched on the corner of the little stage sat the Digger smirking at him, and somehow managing to convey a grateful sense of repletion. For a second he stood paralysed, his mind racing.

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Something had gone desperately wrong. Why had the Digger not accompanied Mr. Marion to his ultimate destination? The possibility of it really being attached to himself was more than he could face. . . .

Nobody else seemed to have noticed the intrusion. Perhaps it was imagination. If he could creep away . . . Quietly he turned, took a few steps, and looked over his shoulder. The Digger was scrambling down the front of the booth. Norman started to run. He knew it was no good; any more than the stick he picked up. Faster and faster, blindly, going nowhere, he didn't see the policeman in his way. " 'Ere, 'ere, what's this?"

But he wrenched his arm out of the policeman's grip. And now he wanted cover. Brandishing his stick he leapt over a turnstile and into the nearest entrance, which happened to be "The House of Terror." Along dimly lit, twisting corridors, with sudden ups and downs, past luminous skeletons and through quick winds, he ran. And though he could hear no footsteps in pursuit he realised, with a hideous sense of it all having happened before, that something close behind came nearer and nearer.

Round one final corner, in utter panic, he fled and, the cycle completed, was brought to an abrupt stop. For there it was, the Enemy he'd so long dreaded to meet — misshapen, grotesquely fat, one arm upraised.

With a dawning understanding that sickened him he stood confronting it. There was no point in trying to run away — there never had been, there never would be. For now he knew who the Enemy was — the distorting mirror made that plain.

And then two red blobs like danger signals in the corner of the mirror brought him shatteringly back to his immediate predicament. Because it was not from the Enemy that he'd been running . . . The shock had for the moment made him forget the Digger. It was all a hideous mistake — and it was backfiring . . . "Once try to make use of it and you're sunk!" The Digger had killed Mr. Marion — now it was after him.

His mind, like a frightened mouse, searched feverishly for a way of escape. And, finding none, collapsed into hysteria. It was the end and he might as well face it — at least he would not have to see the loathsome thing again. Closing his eyes he turned round and, trembling, awaited his fate.

But the moments went by and nothing sprang at him, clawing and tearing. Could it possibly be going to be all right? Oh God, could it? And then a familiar stench made him open his eyes.

The Digger was squatting just in front of him, its spade-tail extended like a hand in friendship. It was looking at him with a kind of fawning affection. "You and I understand each other — we're two of a kind," it seemed to be saying. And with a feeling of degradation more terrible than death he knew that now it would never leave him.

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*Whether she is writing of a bartender who could perform a startling stair trick, or of a nice old lady who suddenly found herself a minister without portfolio, or of a much put-upon spinster whose winning recipe outsmarted an omnipotent Kitchen Autocrat, Mildred Clingerman regularly displays a sensitive understanding of the best in humanity. Now, her subject is not precisely a human, but a supernormal being who is amiable enough if well fed and kept away from visiting literary firemen. As was to be expected, Miss Clingerman understands Stickeney and his prejudices; completely unexpected is the deadpan hilarity with which she tells Stickeney's heart-rending story.*

# *Stickeney and the Critic*

*by* MILDRED CLINGERMAN

I WISH I HAD THOUGHT to throw Stickeney a live chicken on Midsummer Eve. There's no sense in doing it now, but if I'm still alive next year, I'll be sure to remember. I've been tossing live chickens at Stickeney for over 50 years, once a year around Midsummer Eve, give or take a day. Stickeney is no stickler for the absolutely correct day. (Now is as good a time as any to tell you that I hate and despise puns, but I'm getting old, and as my joints stiffen I seem to grow lax in other ways.)

I've been sitting out on the east veranda, staring down the road that leads to town, smoking my pipe and waiting for the law to show up. I've been expecting the Town Marshal, but it could just as well be the F.B.I. because this affair has international complications. But the road is empty and dusk is drawing down, so here I am in the parlor writing out the whole thing while there's time. I wish I could believe the disappearance of the Englishman will go unnoted, but the truth is Mr. Cecil Cholmondeley was very well known in some circles. But I go on hoping, knowing full well "man lives in hope and dies in despair." This is a direct quotation from my father, who settled here in Oklahoma when it was Indian Territory; who, in fact, already had Mother staked out here on this very land while he lined up with the others in the Land Rush and pretended he wasn't one of those "Sooners" who had sneaked in before the signal. My mother had orders to shoot anybody who came nosing around and did shoot Father in the leg before she recognized him.



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The reason Father wanted this land so much has a lot to do with Stickeney, though nobody knew about Stickeney at the time. Indians had camped on this land before the soldiers moved them out, but somebody had been here before — long before. Certainly it wasn't the Indians who had built the ancient stone barn or dug the huge stone-lined well. Father, in his forays into the forbidden territory, spotted the barn, the well, and the cleared acres and was determined he'd have the place come hell or the U. S. Army. He got it, with Mother's help, and, moreover, steered his brothers and their wives onto nearby homesteads so that I grew up surrounded by kinfolk, thinking I was cousin to every mortal soul on earth. After a while I even had Indian relatives as the Indians drifted back among us, and it was from one of these, a very wrinkled old squaw (relative by marriage) who named for us the thing in the well.

"Stickeney", she pointed at the well, backing away and twisting her face into horrible shapes. She chomped her toothless old gums together and repeated the word. "Stickeney . . . bad Stickeney."

Father found out soon enough that there was something strange about the well, stranger even than its size or its stonework or its location in what was supposed to be unsettled wilderness. At first he used the barn to stable the team, and the well for a watering trough for all the stock, since Mother refused to use the water from it, even for scrubbing. The well wasn't like any well she had ever seen, and she didn't like the look of the water. In the first place the water level came within inches of the ground surface and had an oily, black look. The stone coping around the well was just over a foot high, and you could see deep enough into the water to note the green-slimed stones that lined it. The whole thing had a diameter of fifteen feet, and when Father tried to sound it he had to give up. The well was as near bottomless as a hole could get in this world, he said. Before a week went by Father lost a mule to the well.

It happened just about twilight, as I've heard Father tell it. He heard this mule squealing and splashing and got there just in time to see the mule dragged under. *Dragged* under. The water in the well swirled for an hour before it finally quieted down. Father insisted the mule had fallen in and been dragged to the depths of the earth by a whirlpool. Just a plain, cussed whirlpool, he said, that happened to rise up in his well from subterranean rivers or something. That's what he told Mother. But that night he screamed in his sleep, and the next day he started fencing the well away from the barn. Eventually he tore the old barn down and our big house (this very one) has a foundation of its stones — stones with strange carvings. The well was fenced off in one corner of the acre used for the kitchen garden. My father's new barn was as far away from the old well as he could conveniently place it.

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I am the fourth son of my father and was, I am told, a very ordinary Bottle baby. I forgot to tell you that my family name is Bottle. My full and real name is Abstain Bottle, because my mother had a fiendish sense of humor. I have been called Ab all my life, and I forgave Mother long ago. An ordinary Bottle baby walks at eight and one-half months, talks fluently and clearly at no later than ten months, and teaches himself to read before the age of four years. This last is accomplished by the reading aloud of Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* by some adult, over and over until the child knows them by heart. Then comes the glad day when light is shed over the mystery of words, and the child comprehends instantly the relationship between letters and sounds, and is ever afterward capable of reading anything but modern criticism. (This method is no longer practised except by far-flung remnants of the Bottles, though I once divulged the entire procedure to the University of Oklahoma with no thanks received whatsoever.)

You have all heard of my cousin DeWitt Quintan Bottle.

That is, you have heard of him if you have heard of people like T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, or of poetry or poets. Just let somebody mention poets, poetry, or even the words *avant garde* and eventually my cousin's name will bob up. I am not claiming he is worthy of mention with the poets I have named, but other people have certainly named him in exactly the same tone and the same breath. DeWitt Quintan Bottle, for all that, was not up to the standard for Bottle babies. In the first place, he didn't walk until he was thirteen months old, and even at eighteen months of age still talked baby talk and his grammar was atrocious. I happened to be around to hear the first poem he ever composed, which turned into a family joke so well remembered that it helped to drive DeWitt away from his family and country to settle in England and write poetry just for spite.

DeWitt used to visit at our house as a child, and it was the duty of all the children around the place to keep the chickens out of the kitchen garden, and particularly out of the enclosure that held the old well and Stickeney. Chickens were known to disappear with loud squawks if they hopped upon the old well curbing, and it was no good covering the well, because Father tried that. The boards just got smashed, somehow.

DeWitt was terrified of Stickeney and loathed chasing chickens anyway. He was just eighteen months old, with long yellow curls, and his pants falling off when he stood in front of Mother defiantly refusing to help. He cried:

"Poor little baby,
Tan't walk hard'y
*Won't* drive tzickies
Out of Auntie's gardy."

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There you are. DeWitt's first poem. He never lived it down. Bottles everywhere knew all about it and at family reunions and dinner parties and funerals it is still repeated with laughter. When he was fifteen DeWitt couldn't stand it any longer. He ran away. Quit farming for good. We were near enough the same age that DeWitt sneaked over to our house to tell me goodbye. Said I was his only friend in the family. All the other Bottles, he said, were down on him because he was backward. He'd show them, he said. All the other Bottle cousins thought he was a coward because he was scared to death of Stickeney. What he said was true enough. All the other Bottle kids would stand around the old well and chant until the water started swirling — gently at first, then faster and faster. When the water was really whirling good we'd toss in a live chicken. It was a favorite Sunday afternoon sport while the grown people napped in the parlor. But not DeWitt. We told him over and over that Stickeney liked us kids, and if he'd just throw in one chicken Stickeney would like him, too. But DeWitt went chasing off to England and became a poet.

That was nearly 50 years ago. DeWitt's dead now, and famous as all get out. And poor old Stickeney just gets one live chicken a year. The new crops of Bottle kids don't even know about him. I've sort of kept him quiet, a personal pet, you might say. I never married, and kinfolk don't visit the way they used to. As a matter of fact, I've only had one visitor in the last few weeks. Cecil Cholmondeley was the fellow's name. Fussy little man who wrote modern criticism. Wanted to do a book, he said, all about DeWitt's early influences. Wanted to drink in DeWitt's background, walk in DeWitt's footsteps, so to speak. I welcomed him. Told him to look around. Recited DeWitt's first poem. Warned him away from the old well. He wanted to know why. Told him DeWitt was always scared to death of it. Just that. We had an early dinner, and I was feeling sleepy, but Cecil wanted to stroll around the place.

"It's all so unspoiled," he said. "So primitive, really. One forgets that America is not all glitter and dazzle. I shall walk about, quoting Bottle's better bits and feel my way into the place. All right, sir?"

"Sure," I said. "Help yourself. Just stay away from the old well, though. It's not a healthy spot — too damp and weedy. Might be snakes."

That was the second time I warned Cecil away from the well. Just for the record. Cecil left with me a copy of a new magazine he'd brought along called *New Articulations*, open at a page which featured one of DeWitt's poems, and underneath it a critical review by Cecil himself. I read DeWitt's poem first, before I went on to read Cecil's Review. I was astonished. Not at the poem. DeWitt's poems are all much of a muchness to me, I confess. But Cecil's review . . . well, I wanted to tell him a thing or two when

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he came back. Here is the whole thing, poem and review, just so you'll know what I mean.

Early Departure

by DeWitt Quintan Bottle

In the well
feathers?
Floating (oily
wretched
The swirling swelling
The voiceless YELLing
All the down-yonder(ing)
Infinitely pondering
fear-blown the future
wafts one away (clackety-trackety)
Don't forget to tip the porter.

DeWitt Quintan Bottle in Perspective
A Review of *Early Departure* by Cecil Cholmondeley

The discovery of this Bottle poem, found in his papers after his death, should in the opinion of this reviewer, secure DeWitt Quintan Bottle's position as the most penetrating commentator on this age. Other poets have, it is true, commented (in a minor key) on the same theme — the inflated ground-swelling trauma of man face to face with himself — but none has shown so much stature, poise, and peculiar excellence of craftsmanship. The "well" symbol (obviously the Existentialist mirror image) combined with the shockingly distraught "feathers" impales with one word a vast social fallacy (man's flight-wish exposed for what it is). "Floating" and "oily" are magnificently playful examples of Bottle's expanding metaphor technique. The stark "wretched" uncoils like a naked snake to hiss at us before we invoke the sensuous beauty of "The swirling swelling" — alliteration being one of Bottle's most incremental effects, achieving great density in a many-doored room. "The voiceless YELLing" is a key passage. For sheer wantonness this is unsurpassed. There is good meat (and some lovely gristle) in the next two lines. Here we discover unity imposed upon experience, demonstrating a powerful sense of self-involvement. The last line is a poignant prayer. A great poet's last and most strenuous act towards self-discipline.

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I read this review over once again and got so mad I couldn't wait for Cecil to come back, but started out looking for him. I wanted to tell him about Stickeney, and then chant at Stickeney until the water started whirling, and then ask smart-aleck Cecil if he hadn't read a whole hell of a lot into DeWitt's poem that DeWitt had no notion of. It was just a fancied-up poem about Stickeney, and about DeWitt's leaving home and riding a train for the first time.

I went stomping along till I heard Cecil declaiming DeWitt's last poem in the kitchen garden. In spite of all I told him Cecil was out there beside the well. Dark was coming on and I tried to hurry, but my knees were stiff and I heard the splashing and YELLing before I could get there.

One thing I'd like to know is just what angered Stickeney. Was it DeWitt's poem, or the critic's English accent, or just that I'd forgotten to toss him a chicken for a long, long while? One thing I know, I'm not going to go ask Stickeney. Not while the water's whirling like that. He's just too dog-gone excited. That water's been whirling a full week. Ever since Cecil was taken, so sudden-like. And the old chant we used to chant at Stickeney keeps coming back to mind.

"Fee, fie, foe, fum
I smell the blood of an Englishman.
Be he alive, or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones to make my bread."

I'm downright ashamed of Stickeney. But it's my fault — I should have tossed him a chicken on Midsummer Eve. The thing is, now he's had a taste of English blood, I'm not sure he'll be content with chicken.

All the Bottles are of English descent.

I do hope, though, it's just a taste for modern criticism Stickeney has acquired. God knows, he's quite capable of swallowing it.

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*Understanding is the keynote of Kay Rogers' short and sensitive stories. Earlier in F&SF her insight has enabled us to understand the compulsions which drove a victim willingly to Jack the Ripper, and the pride and bitterness which govern the actions of an amulet-demon. Now understanding is itself the theme of her story, as she studies the efforts of an interplanetary conqueror to comprehend the baffling emotions of a vanquished race.*

# *Experiment*

*by* KAY ROGERS

COBR FOUND the female necessary to his experiment in the slave pens.

He used to go there as a kind of research. Perhaps it was morbid to study the Terrans sold for tax default — Cobr had sufficient emotional range for so much empathy — but he was no sadist. The pens were the richest source of the phenomenon he wished to study.

Today he was late. Already the attendants had begun classifying. Eagerly, he watched them force apart a male and female — thus it nearly always was.

His lidless gaze was so intent he failed to notice a slave approach him within the pen's barrier.

"Gloating snake!"

"Why should I gloat?" he asked her with the rigid courtesy of his race.

"Because you've beaten us, Venusian — and treat us like cattle!"

"We have not been unkind," Cobr said.

"Unkind!" she mocked. "Who are you to judge? You don't even love each other!"

Cobr knew Terran culture well and he recognized the basis for her exaggeration. His people did not sentimentalize reproduction. One went to the mating clinics as required. How could he analyze this Terran nonsense?

"They weep because they love each other and they are separated," Cobr summed up, half to the slave. "But neither is a unique type. I have read your psychologists; love is a sentiment arising from a cluster of pleasing habits centered about a certain individual. Habits may be altered."

Why were they not, then? The thought to experiment came to Cobr.

He must use a Terran female. There could be no mating — it was the emotional aberration he wished to investigate.

First, he should consider eye-pleasure, according to Terran custom. Once



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one accepted the pale skin, unpatterned by scales, and the fine tendrils which replaced the head crest, the conquered were not unpleasing.

The slave who had accosted him had copper-colored tendrils and storm-gray eyes — not unusual, perhaps, but adequate.

"Will you join my household?" Cobr asked, using the courtesy phrase tradition demanded for one of his own race.

He gave her quarters hung in shifting water-tints of blue and green, chosen to set off her coloring. And learning that she had been a singer, he obtained a *guitar*.

He had read that women used their voices thus to beguile and he was pleased he might subject himself to such sounds.

But when the slave heard his plan, her brows slanted together.

"Why should I sing for you?"

Cobr hesitated. He did not wish to remind her she was his slave.

"Is this not a foolish matter for rudeness?" he said finally. "Surely it must please you to sing, since it was your profession. And I wish to listen."

Even a Terran could follow such logic, so each evening the slave sang to Cobr's expressionless golden stare.

He went no more to the pens. True, there were few auctions now. The yellow mold, true conqueror of Terra, harmless to Cobr's race, broke out anew and raged through the city.

But he had forgotten the pens, listening to the slave's plaintive, smoky voice. How unlike the labor hymns and battle chants of his people! The slave's songs told only of regretted or baffled matings. Strange, useless music!

As strange as the mistake he had made regarding the slave's beauty. She was not merely adequate, but an extraordinarily beautiful specimen of her race.

There was the fired metal of her *hair* — as Cobr learned to call it — above the blue or green robes of soft ilon he had chosen for her wearing.

And the mobility of her face as she sang — one watched the mouth especially. That was because a faint, slanting shadow lay along either cheek subtly pointing to her lips. So now he admired her? Yes, Cobr decided, it was true. Then it was time for the next step. He must make her a gift.

From the thick arm of a "free" Terran female, he rescued — not without bitter protests — a bracelet of soft gold. It was set with certain crystallines which were rare upon Terra.

"I know how it is used," he said proudly when he clasped it upon his slave's wrist.

How small that wrist was! And how coarse his dark, scaled fingers appeared against its creamy smoothness!

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She turned the bracelet upon her arm.

"Where did you steal it?" she asked.

Here was rudeness like a whip! Cobr winced. "I purchased it from a wanderer," he said with dignity.

How primitive to lie! Yet he enjoyed seeing the glitter at her wrist, knowing it was his gift she wore.

"Why do you give me this?" she asked in her abrupt way.

"So you will think well of me," Cobr answered truthfully.

He remembered that sometimes she smiled as she sang. Cautiously, he asked, "Do you yet think of me as a snake?"

He tried to see his dark scaled suppleness, his crested immobile face through her eyes. The bracelet seemed less important, only a trifle.

"I never thought to sing again," the slave said after a time. "You made it possible. It's kind of you, I think."

He had not thought to be kind. To admit it was a discourtesy.

"I am glad you are happier," he said gravely.

"Are you?" she said. And still without mockery, she added, "Thank you for the bracelet."

How courteous she could be, Cobr thought. The pleasure in his gift returned. In her songs that night, he thought he found the shadow of a pattern.

But next evening, his steward, Ghar, reported, "The singing one is dead, lord."

Cobr went to her room. Ghar followed.

"It was the yellow mold," he explained. "You know its swiftness."

Yes, he knew. He lifted the *guitar* in his three-fingered hands. A string twanged and the heavy tapestries swallowed the empty sound.

"I am sure there are others so skilled," Ghar said in a bustle of service. "Tomorrow, I shall inquire."

"No," Cobr said. He put down the *guitar*. "I do not wish another singing one."

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*We are indebted to Czechoslovakia for innumerable items without which life would be poorer: the beer of Pilsen, the political thinking of Masaryk and Beneš, the music of Dvořák and Smetana, the voice of Emmy Destinn . . . and the word* robot. *It seems unbelievable that it is only 30 years since that invaluable word entered the English language from the Czech in the translation of Karel Čapek's play* R. U. R.; *surely few loan words have ever become so firmly naturalized in American writing. The late Mr. Čapek, with the musical taste which seems to be part of the heritage of all Czechs, would have been particularly pleased, we think, with Herbert Goldstone's suggestive footnote on the possible future relation of robots and music.*

# Virtuoso

*by* HERBERT GOLDSTONE

"SIR?"

The Maestro continued to play, not looking up from the keys.

"Yes, Rollo?"

"Sir, I was wondering if you would explain this apparatus to me."

The Maestro stopped playing, his thin body stiffly relaxed on the bench. His long supple fingers floated off the keyboard.

"Apparatus?" He turned and smiled at the robot. "Do you mean the piano, Rollo?"

"This machine that produces varying sounds. I would like some information about it, its operation and purpose. It is not included in my reference data."

The Maestro lit a cigarette. He preferred to do it himself. One of his first orders to Rollo when the robot was delivered two days before had been to disregard his built-in instructions on the subject.

"I'd hardly call a piano a machine, Rollo," he smiled, "although technically you are correct. It is actually, I suppose, a machine designed to produce sounds of graduated pitch and tone, singly or in groups."

"I assimilated that much by observation," Rollo replied in the brassy baritone which no longer sent tiny tremors up the Maestro's spine. "Wires



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of different thickness and tautness struck by felt-covered hammers activated by manually operated levers arranged in a horizontal panel."

"A very cold-blooded description of one of man's nobler works," the Maestro remarked drily. "You make Mozart and Chopin mere laboratory technicians."

"Mozart? Chopin?" The duralloy sphere that was Rollo's head shone stark and featureless, its immaculate surface unbroken but for twin vision lenses. "The terms are not included in my memory banks."

"No, not yours, Rollo," the Maestro said softly. "Mozart and Chopin are not for vacuum tubes and fuses and copper wire. They are for flesh and blood and human tears."

"I do not understand," Rollo droned.

"Well," the Maestro said, smoke curling lazily from his nostrils, "they are two of the humans who compose, or design successions of notes — varying sounds, that is, produced by the piano or by other instruments, machines, that produce other types of sounds of fixed pitch and tone.

"Sometimes these instruments, as we call them, are played, or operated, individually; sometimes in groups — orchestras, as we refer to them — and the sounds blend together, they harmonize. That is they have an orderly mathematical relationship to each other which results in —"

The Maestro threw up his hands.

"I never imagined," he chuckled, "that I would some day struggle so mightily, and so futilely, to explain music to a robot!"

"Music?"

"Yes, Rollo. The sounds produced by this machine and others of the same category are called music."

"What is the purpose of music, sir?"

"Purpose?"

The Maestro crushed the cigarette in an ash tray. He turned to the keyboard of the concert grand and flexed his fingers briefly.

"Listen, Rollo."

The wraith-like fingers glided and wove the opening bars of *Clair de Lune*, slender and delicate as spider silk. Rollo stood rigid, the fluorescent over the music rack casting a bluish jeweled sheen over his towering bulk, shimmering in the amber vision lenses.

The Maestro drew his hands back from the keys and the subtle thread of melody melted reluctantly into silence.

"Claude Debussy," the Maestro said. "One of our mechanics of an era long passed. He designed that succession of tones many years ago. What do you think of it?"

Rollo did not answer at once.

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"The sounds were well formed," he replied finally. "They did not jar my auditory senses as some do."

The Maestro laughed. "Rollo, you may not realize it, but you're a wonderful critic."

"This music, then," Rollo droned. "Its purpose is to give pleasure to humans?"

"Exactly," the Maestro said. "Sounds well formed, that do not jar the auditory senses as some do. Marvelous! It should be carved in marble over the entrance of New Carnegie Hall."

"I do not understand. Why should my definition —?"

The Maestro waved a hand. "No matter, Rollo. No matter."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Rollo?"

"Those sheets of paper you sometimes place before you on the piano. They are the plans of the composer indicating which sounds are to be produced by the piano and in what order?"

"Just so. We call each sound a note, combinations of notes we call chords."

"Each dot, then, indicates a sound to be made?"

"Perfectly correct, my man of metal."

Rollo stared straight ahead. The Maestro felt a peculiar sense of wheels turning within that impregnable sphere.

"Sir, I have scanned my memory banks and find no specific or implied instructions against it. I should like to be taught how to produce these notes on the piano. I request that you feed the correlation between these dots and the levers of the panel into my memory banks."

The Maestro peered at him, amazed. A slow grin traveled across his face.

"Done!" he exclaimed. "It's been many years since pupils helped gray these ancient locks, but I have the feeling that you, Rollo, will prove a most fascinating student. To instill the Muse into metal and machinery . . . I accept the challenge, gladly!"

He rose, touched the cool latent power of Rollo's arm.

"Sit down here, my Rolleindex Personal Robot, Model M-3. We shall start Beethoven spinning in his grave — or make musical history!"

More than an hour later, the Maestro yawned and looked at his watch.

"It's late," he spoke into the end of the yawn. "These old eyes are not tireless like yours, my friend." He touched Rollo's shoulder. "You have the complete fundamentals of musical notation in your memory banks, Rollo. That's a good night's lesson, particularly when I recall how long it took me to acquire the same amount of information. Tomorrow we'll attempt to put those awesome fingers of yours to work."

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He stretched. "I'm going to bed," he said. "Will you lock up and put out the lights?"

Rollo rose from the bench. "Yes, sir," he droned. "I have a request."

"What can I do for my star pupil?"

"May I attempt to create some sounds with the keyboard tonight? I will do so very softly so as not to disturb you."

"Tonight? Aren't you —?" Then the Maestro smiled. "You must pardon me, Rollo. It is still a bit difficult for me to realize that sleep has no meaning for you."

He hesitated, rubbing his chin. "Well, I suppose a good teacher should not discourage impatience to learn. All right, Rollo, but please be careful." He patted the polished mahogany. "This piano and I have been together for many years. I'd hate to see its teeth knocked out by those sledge hammer digits of yours. Lightly, my friend, very lightly."

"Yes, sir."

The Maestro fell asleep with a faint smile on his lips, dimly aware of the shy, tentative notes that Rollo was coaxing forth.

Then gray fog closed in and he was in that half-world where reality is dreamlike and dreams are real. It was soft and feathery and lavender clouds and sounds rolling and washing across his mind in flowing waves.

Where? The mist drew back a bit and he was in red velvet and deep and the music swelled and broke over him.

He smiled.

My recording. Thank you, thank you, thank —

The Maestro snapped erect, threw the covers aside.

He sat on the edge of the bed, listening.

He groped for his robe in the darkness, shoved bony feet into his slippers.

He crept, trembling uncontrollably, to the door of his studio and stood there, thin and brittle in the robe.

The light over the music rack was an eerie island in the brown shadows of the studio. Rollo sat at the keyboard, prim, inhuman, rigid, twin lenses focused somewhere off into the shadows.

The massive feet working the pedals, arms and hands flashing and glinting — they were living entities, separate, somehow, from the machined perfection of his body.

The music rack was empty.

A copy of Beethoven's *Appassionata* lay closed on the bench. It had been, the Maestro remembered, in a pile of sheet music on the piano.

Rollo was playing it.

Playing?

He was creating it, breathing it, drawing it through silver flame.

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Time became meaningless, suspended in mid air.

The Maestro didn't realize he was weeping until Rollo finished the sonata.

The robot turned to look at the Maestro. "The sounds," he droned. "They pleased you?"

The Maestro's lips quivered. "Yes, Rollo," he replied at last. "They pleased me." He fought the lump in his throat.

He picked up the music in fingers that shook.

"This," he murmured. "Already?"

"It has been added to my store of data," Rollo replied. "I applied the principles you explained to me to these plans. It was not very difficult."

The Maestro swallowed as he tried to speak. "It was not very difficult . . ." he repeated softly.

The old man sank down slowly onto the bench next to Rollo, stared silently at the robot as though seeing him for the first time.

Rollo got to his feet.

The Maestro let his fingers rest on the keys, strangely foreign now.

"Music!" he breathed. "I may have heard it that way in my soul! I know Beethoven did!"

He looked up at the robot, a growing excitement in his face.

"Rollo," he said, his voice straining to remain calm. "You and I have some work to do tomorrow on your memory banks."

Sleep did not come again that night.

He strode briskly into the studio the next morning. Rollo was vacuuming the carpet. The Maestro preferred carpets to the new dust-free plastics, which felt somehow profane to his feet.

The Maestro's house was, in fact, an oasis of anachronisms in a desert of contemporary antiseptic efficiency.

"Well, are you ready for work, Rollo?" he asked. "We have a lot to do, you and I. I have such plans for you, Rollo — great plans!"

Rollo, for once, did not reply.

"I have asked them all to come here this afternoon," the Maestro went on. "Conductors, concert pianists, composers, my manager. All the giants of music, Rollo. Wait until they hear you play!"

Rollo switched off the vacuum and stood quietly.

"You'll play for them right here this afternoon." The Maestro's voice was high-pitched, breathless. "The *Appassionata* again, I think. Yes, that's it. I must see their faces!

"Then we'll arrange a recital to introduce you to the public and the critics and then a major concerto with one of the big orchestras. We'll have it telecast around the world, Rollo. It can be arranged.

"Think of it, Rollo, just think of it! The greatest piano virtuoso of all

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time . . . a robot! It's completely fantastic and completely wonderful. I feel like an explorer at the edge of a new world!"

He walked feverishly back and forth.

"Then recordings, of course. My entire repertoire, Rollo, and more. So much more!"

"Sir?"

The Maestro's face shone as he looked up at him. "Yes, Rollo?"

"In my built-in instructions, I have the option of rejecting any action which I consider harmful to my owner." The robot's words were precise, carefully selected. "Last night you wept. That is one of the indications I am instructed to consider in making my decisions."

The Maestro gripped Rollo's thick, superbly moulded arm.

"Rollo, you don't understand. That was for the moment. It was petty of me, childish!"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I must refuse to approach the piano again."

The Maestro stared at him, unbelieving, pleading.

"Rollo, you can't! The world must hear you!"

"No, sir." The amber lenses almost seemed to soften.

"The piano is not a machine," that powerful inhuman voice droned. "To me, yes. I can translate the notes into sounds at a glance. From only a few I am able to grasp at once the composer's conception. It is easy for me."

Rollo towered magnificently over the Maestro's bent form.

"I can also grasp," the brassy monotone rolled through the studio, "that this . . . music is not for robots. It is for man. To me it is easy, yes . . . It was not meant to be easy."

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## THE ESCAPIST

Mars may also be a place
Where one dreams of Outer Space.

edb, San Francisco *Chronicle*

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# Recommended Reading

*by* THE EDITORS

THE "little magazine" cultural school has often experimented with science-fantasy in the short story, and sometimes with firstrate results, some of which we have reprinted here. But these frequently fascinating shorter efforts had hardly prepared us for what would happen when a fashionable literary cultist goes all out on a full-length science fiction novel.

"Full-length" is indeed an understatement for Bernard Wolfe's LIMBO (Random), which is as long as three average popular novels. It is influenced by every modernly modish writer from Laurence Sterne to Jean Paul Sartre (plus someone whom the author calls "A. A. van Vogt"); but the dominant influence is James Joyce . . . if you can imagine a Joyce completely devoid of poetry and humor.

The extrapolation of a future world civilization based on voluntary amputation and super-prosthetics is a symbolically interesting idea, but, despite the length, never developed with consistent or convincing details (particularly political and economic). The book is, in the author's own words, "a grab bag of ideas that were more or less around at the mid-century mark" — all hermit-scientist ideas of a kind of stylish coterie-potency, from the Bates Method through General Semantics to Dianetics, all taken equally seriously, all equally undigested.

This pretentious hodgepodge is dealt with at such length because it is, in a peculiar way, "recommended reading." Style, bulk and publisher's promotion will cause this gallimaufry to be taken seriously by critics who wouldn't even open a book by Robert A. Heinlein; you readers who know what science fiction is and can be should at least look at it, so that you may, like Anderson's observant child, proclaim to the credulous that the Emperor is naked.

F&SF readers and the critics of "little magazines" may meet somewhat more easily on the subject of Franz Kafka. There still may be controversy; there is even within this office. But many of you, like one of your editors, may find the SELECTED STORIES OF FRANZ KAFKA (Modern Library) one of the year's most stimulating volumes of imaginative literature. Disregard the often unfortunate influence of Kafka on his imitators, and read the man himself for bitingly logical development of strange concepts, for a powerful ability to create convincing other worlds that serve as significant mirror-



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images of our own, and for (what so many devout Kafkaites overlook) a peculiar vein of individual humor.

Esthetico-literary purists will have some reason for shunning Eric Frank Russell's SENTINELS FROM SPACE (Bouregy & Curl), published in magazine form as THE STAR WATCHERS. Mr. Russell can, we know, produce much better prose than this too often crude and unpolished writing. But it's worth putting up with the crudities for the sensible and logical working out of a civilization of specialized mutants who are *not* supermen, the strong melodramatic plotting, and the effective mystification ending in a plausibly startling solution. Much the opposite is true of Leigh Brackett's THE STARMEN (Gnome), an expansion of her THE STARMEN OF LLYRDIS — an able job of writing a completely routine and uncreative space opera. If you like the oversimplified adventures of beautiful wicked women and beautiful gallant men, you'll at least find yourself in capable hands.

That absolute Old Master of the craft, Robert A. Heinlein, continues to write better, more intriguing science fiction in his juveniles than is produced in most books aimed directly at adult readers. His latest, THE ROLLING STONES (Scribner's), the exciting chronicle of a slightly screwball family's voyagings from the moon to Mars and thence to the asteroid belt is both some of the best entertainment we have read this year and easily the most plausible, carefully detailed picture of an interplanetary future we will encounter in any year. The sons of your editors have not been able to read the novel as yet simply because our wives laid firm hands on it the moment we finished reading for review. Which should give you a clear idea of the nature of the audience these adventures of the charming Stones will find. Another juvenile that will appeal to many adults is THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER, by C. S. Lewis (Macmillan). While not quite up to the high level set by previous Narnian adventures of the Pevensie children, this story has one of Lewis' finest imaginings in Reepicheep, a mouse who is a noble blend of Cyrano and Don Quixote. Competent enough, but strictly for the young is STAND BY FOR MARS!, by Carey Rockwell (Grosset), a book adventure of that hero of the comic strips and TV, Tom Corbett, Space Cadet. Readers should remember that the whole idea of the Space Academy and its Cadets was first conceived by the above mentioned Mr. Heinlein!

We are pleased to note new activity in the Grosset and Dunlap series of dollar reprints of science fiction, edited by Groff Conklin. The first issue in this line in over a year is Isaac Asimov's enjoyable I, ROBOT. The latest in the Galaxy Novel reprints, choice reading for only 35¢, is SEEDS OF LIFE, by John Taine. The revised edition of EVERYMAN'S SMALLER CLASSICAL DICTIONARY (Dutton) is mentioned here for the especial benefit of that multitude of witless scribes who write with total ignorance about classical figures.

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*In which Mr. Randolph continues his series of Ozark folk-tales with the story of a boy who wasn't very particular in his choice of girl-friends.*

# *Slipping Through the Keyhole*

*by* VANCE RANDOLPH

ONE TIME there was a orphan boy named Harry, and he went to work for old Gram Wallace and her two daughters. They had the best farm on the creek, but the house didn't amount to much. It was just a one room log cabin, with three beds in it. Gram slept in the best bed all by herself, the two girls slept together in another big bed, and Harry had a shake-down over by the door. They set a good table, and treated Harry all right, but he was kind of worried about something.

Every once in a while Harry would wake up in the night, and all three of them women was gone. But the door was still barred, and the window shutter hooked on the inside. And then when he got up in the morning, there was Gram and the girls in their beds. Harry knowed there was something funny a-going on, but he couldn't figure out how they done it.

Finally one night he just let on like he was asleep, and he seen them women get up and put a pan of water on the hearth. They washed their face in the water, and each one says: "Out I go and touch nowhere!" And with that all three of 'em flicked right up the big old chimney. After they was gone Harry got up and washed his face. "Out I go and touch nowhere!" says he. Before you could bat a eye he was up the chimney and flying through the air. Pretty soon he lit in a big pasture, where all kind of people was fiddling and dancing and having a regular picnic. Some of them women didn't have enough clothes on to wad a shotgun. Harry liked it fine, and everybody treated him wonderful. But all of a sudden a rooster crowed, and the next thing Harry knowed he was back home in bed. Gram Wallace and the girls was in their beds too, and time to get up and do the chores.

After breakfast the youngest girl winked at Harry, and she says: "Did you have a good time last night?" Harry told her he sure did. "Well," she says, "you sneak off and meet me down by the sheep-shed pretty soon." So Harry done it, and him and her had more fun than you could shake a stick at. He went down to the sheep-shed every day after that. "This flying up chimneys ain't nothing," she says. "You stick with me, and I'll show you



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how to slip through keyholes." And so they used to get into stores of a night, and eat all the candy they wanted. Sometimes they would go right into people's houses, and maybe knock something over and scare hell out of the folks. One time they seen a man in bed with his wife, so they waited awhile and then both of them busted out laughing. The man jumped up and started to get his gun, but they was out of the keyhole before he could see who it was. Harry never did learn the words just right, so whenever they went to slip through a keyhole the Wallace girl would tell him what to say, and he just mumbled it after her.

Everything went fine till the night they slipped into old man Gifford's house. Old man Gifford was on the school board, and so the pretty schoolmarm stayed at his place. Her door was open, and Harry got kind of rattled. He forgot all about the Wallace girl, and jumped right in bed with the pretty schoolmarm. But the schoolmarm could tell right away it wasn't old man Gifford, so she began to holler. She hit Harry on the head with her shoe and knocked him plumb senseless. The Wallace girl was mad, so she just slipped out the keyhole by herself. Poor Harry sure was in a bad fix. Old man Gifford like to beat him to death, and then tied him up with rope. Next morning the sheriff come and put him in jail.

Harry laid in jail for pretty near a month. He just set there day and night trying to think of the words you say to slip through a keyhole, but he couldn't do it. The night before they was going to have the trial, the Wallace girl come and said the words for him, so he got out. But she was still pretty mad, and she says a man like him ain't fit to slip through keyholes or anything else. She says he better high-tail it clear out of the country before morning, or else Gram Wallace will say some words to turn him into a boar hog. Harry never returned no answer. He just took off through the woods, and nobody in that country ever laid eyes on him again.

The county officers made a terrible holler about Harry getting out of jail, with the door still locked and all. Some thought old man Gifford must have paid the sheriff to take him out and kill him. But old man Gifford says if he wanted to kill anybody he'd have done it the night Harry was ketched in a criminal act, and not called the sheriff till afterward. So most folks figured the Wallace girl let him out the keyhole and turned him loose, just like the old story says. It sounds more reasonable that way.

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*It's a regrettably common practise among pulp magazines to label short stories as novelets, and novelets as "complete book-length novels"; but once in a great while a talented writer can prove that a novelet really deserves the "book-length novel" label. J. T. M'Intosh's* One in Three Hundred *is only a quarter the length of the average popular novel; but in its broad canvas, its convincing detail, its development and interplay of character, it is more truly novelistic than the large majority of hard-cover science fiction books. The violent-end-of-the-world theme has long been familiar to thousands of readers, and more recently to millions of film-goers; but we venture the opinion that never before has a writer portrayed so vividly precisely what the lives of ordinary people would be like in the face of the coming annihilation of our earth.*

# *One in Three Hundred*

*by* J. T. M'INTOSH

## I

I IGNORED the half-human thing that ran at my heels like a dog crying "Please! Please! Please!" I ignored it, except when I had to strike its arm from mine, because that was the only thing to do.

I was 28, Lieutenant Bill Easson, and a more unremarkable young man it would have been difficult to find. But now, through no fault of my own, I was a god.

I'm not going to try to tell the whole story of those last three weeks. That would fill a library. So if you're looking for some big thing you know about and find it isn't even mentioned, or wonder how I'm going to explain this or that, and find I don't, remember I had a job to do and had no time to stand and stare.

When I reached the main street of Simsville (pop. 3,261) I was soon rid of the poor wretch at my heels. Two loungers swept him away when they recognized me. I don't know what they did with him. I didn't ask. I never saw him again.

Pat Darrell joined me, automatically. She didn't even say "Hullo." A little over two weeks before, when I came to Simsville, she was the



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first person to speak to me. "It's all right," she had assured me at once, "I'm just naturally friendly. I don't want what everyone else wants. At least, I don't expect to get it. So you can write that off, for a start."

Naturally I had been suspicious, believing this to be a new play for the same old stake. Everybody wants to live. And what I brought with me, no more and no less, was the power of life and death.

But I had found that Pat meant exactly what she said. She was the most sincere person I ever met. She had come to accept long since the fact that she just wasn't lucky. She never won anything. When she told me this I asked curiously, "Even beauty competitions?" "Second," she murmured briefly, as if that explained everything. In a way it did.

As we walked, Fred Mortenson favored us with a jaunty wave from the other side of the street. Mortenson was Pat's opposite. He knew he was going to live; it wasn't worth even considering anything else. He had been lucky so often with so many things that there just couldn't be anything wrong this time, the most important of all.

Mortenson was right; so was Pat.

Our choice must be representative, they had told us. No one wanted a new world with everyone exactly the same age, so that in a few years' time there would only be people of 40 and young children, and later only old people and youngsters just reaching nubility. So we had been instructed to pick out a representative selection of ten people who seemed to deserve to live.

Our instructions were as casual as that. Some people were never able to grasp the idea. They frowned and talked about psych records and medical histories, and started back in righteous horror when one of us told them what they could do with their records and histories. These people were back-seat drivers. They weren't doing the thing, but of course they knew how it should have been done.

I had decided on my list early, prepared to revise it as various things happened, as they no doubt would. It seemed the best way to work — I could watch the people I had chosen and confirm their selection or change my mind. The list had changed rapidly in the first few days, but not much since then.

Mortenson was on it. Pat wasn't.

The Powells were on it too, though no one knew that but me. Naturally I kept my plans to myself. We saw the Powells just before we entered Henessy's, and stopped to pass the time of day.

Marjory Powell told me it was a nice day. I agreed gratefully. The Powells, Pat and Sammy Hoggan were the only people in the village who could treat me as an ordinary human being. Jack Powell was one of those

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tall, quiet characters with an easy grin. Marjory, without being ugly, was so unbeautiful that she had been able to resign all claims of that kind long ago and concentrate on being a person.

Pat liked them, and so did I. We stood and talked contentedly, and only the knowledge that anyone I spent a lot of time with was marked out for active hatred and jealousy made me take Pat's arm after a few minutes and propel her into the bar.

The Powells didn't seem much affected by the shadow which hung over the world. Their outlook was that the thing was going to come anyway, and they might as well carry on with their usual occupations and hope for the best.

The atmosphere in Henessy's changed perceptibly when we went in. That happened everywhere.

Old Harry Phillips was there, and Sammy Hoggan, inevitably. They waved cheerfully to Pat and me. The others merely glowered, like children told to be on their best behavior and immediately thrown on their worst.

We joined Sammy. Though he had taken the disaster badly, there were a lot of worse ways he might have taken it. He never talked about it. He was going to be drunk for the rest of his life. He was the kind of drinker who merely sat without change of expression and pickled his kidneys.

"Hallo, friends," he said. "*O tempora! O mores! Ave atque vale.*"

"I understood the first two words," Pat admitted cautiously.

"That's all my Latin, honey, so you'll understand anything else I may say."

I was going to buy him a drink, but he begged me not to. "I'm just hoping Henessy doesn't get some sense and realize money doesn't matter any more," he told us. "Because if he doesn't, I'll soon come to the end of this jag. I haven't much money left."

This wasn't surprising, the way he had been drinking ever since I arrived in town. But Pat frowned. "You want to come to the end of the jag?" she repeated. "Then why don't you stop?"

"To the simple," Sammy sighed, "all things are simple." He killed his drink without noticing it. "No offence, honey. But it's like this. If I'd only had a few dollars on me four weeks ago, I'd only have been able to take a short dive into the rotgut. But I was out of luck. I had enough to keep me going for four weeks."

"Four weeks?" I demanded. "Then . . .?"

It was seven weeks since it passed beyond doubt that the end of the world, which had been prophesied so often, was really fixed this time. Two weeks and two days since I started the job of picking out the ten people in Simsville who were to live.

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With the occasionally uncanny directness of the very drunk, Sammy read my thoughts. "You think I'm drinking because the world's coming to an end?" he asked. He burst out laughing. "God, no. Let it end any time it wants to. Four days now, isn't it? Suits me."

He could talk clearly and soberly when he was sitting down, and raise his glass steadily. But as he got up he was at once obviously very drunk. He staggered away to take some of the weight off his kidneys.

Henessy brought our drinks indifferently. He had no hopes of being one of the ten. He looked on his profession with gloomy disdain. Who would take a bartender to Mars? So, like the Powells, he went on in his own way: business as usual. But I liked the Powells. For some reason I couldn't like Henessy.

Harry joined us. Harry was notable for his craggy features, his fatalistic philosophy, his imperturbability and his beautiful granddaughter. Bessie Phillips, at eight, was such a lovely child and had such a sunny nature that I hadn't been able to keep her off my list. I couldn't condemn Bessie to death.

If I'd been asked to justify every selection (but I wouldn't be), Bessie was the only one I'd have to rationalize about. I could produce reasons, just as anyone else rationalizing can produce reasons, but the real one was simply that I wanted to take Bessie and I could. Some other lieutenant would include an old lady because she looked like his mother. Someone else would have good reasons to explain why he was taking along one particular fourteen-year-old boy and not one of 30 or 40 others; the last he'd produce, if he had to produce any, would be that the boy reminded him of the kid brother who died under the wheels of a truck.

Wrong? Sure, if you're still laboring under the idea that the way to do this was selection on the basis of psych records and medical histories, or that the chance of survival should be thrown open to competitive examination.

"Say, Harry," I said. "You know Sammy Hoggan well?"

Harry knew everybody. He nodded, very serious. He knew that whatever he said to me, whatever anyone said to me, might mean life or death for someone. So it was a solemn business talking to me.

It had probably never crossed his mind that he might be one of the ten. When you really came down to it, there was a surprising number of people who took it for granted that they had no right to live, if only a few could survive.

"What's the matter with him?" I asked.

"Thought you knew. His girl left him."

"That all?"

"Son," said Harry seriously, "I've lived a bit longer than you, even if

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you're the most important man around just now. Never say, 'That all?' about someone's reasons for doing anything. That's only your reaction to the circumstances as you know them, and it means next to nothing."

"Okay," I said. "What was the girl like?"

"No good."

"Because she left Sammy?"

"That among other things. Sammy's a good boy, Bill. You'd like him. It's a pity you've no chance now of knowing what he's like."

Unexpectedly, Pat said something coarse and regrettably audible. One of the unfortunate things about Pat was that she could get completely drunk on a thimbleful of whisky.

One of the others, though it ill becomes me to say it, was that when people called her the unpleasant things people so often call beautiful, reckless girls, they were for once perfectly right.

## II

After we'd had another drink or two I decided to go to Havinton, five miles over the hill. Pat wanted to come, but I liked her better sober. She got drunk easily and sobered easily. By the time I got back she'd be all right.

Something was going to happen that afternoon that I wasn't going to like. I had put it off as long as I could. For a while I had thought I was going to be able to put it off until it was too late.

When I first came to Simsville Father Clark came to see me. I'd been told that if I was to cooperate with anyone, it was with ministers of all faiths. We were pretty free; we had little or nothing to do with the police, and nothing at all with other local authorities. But the job the ministers were doing, strangely enough, linked up quite well with ours.

Father Clark was one of those people who are transparently sincere and so humble that you can't help being uncomfortable in their presence and glad to get away. When he said he and Pastor Munch and the Reverend John MacLean would like to have a meeting with me as soon as possible and discuss a few things I was vague and managed to avoid fixing a date. There was a solemnity about working together with clergymen of three faiths that reminded me, when I didn't want to be reminded, that I wasn't just Bill Easson any more.

The three men of God were so busy that it was easy for me to keep stalling. Sure, I was shirking my responsibilities. My only excuse was that that was the only responsibility I was consciously shirking. Other lieutenants would have other things to square with their consciences. Men with color prejudices would have to face up to the idea that the catastrophe wasn't a special

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dispensation to remove all but pure whites from the human race; some lieutenants whose blood crawled at the thought would pick colored men to go to Mars, knowing that if they didn't they would never know peace again. Men who hadn't noticed children for years would realize that there was such a thing as responsibility to young people; the intelligent would discover responsibility for the stupid; and of course all of us were adjusting ourselves to the idea that a baby just out of the womb, a dreamy, clear-skinned boy of eight, a beautiful girl of seventeen, a man in the prime of life and an old toothless woman were all units in the fantastic new numerology we were using.

Anyway, this responsibility had caught up with me. I was to see the three clergymen later that afternoon. Meantime I'd had enough of being important, so I went to Havinton. In Havinton I was just a man among men. The gods there were Lieutenants Britten, Smith, Schutz and Hallstead. From which it might be gathered that Havinton was about four times the size of Simmsville.

It's difficult to say how much warning we had of the end of the world. The first concrete thing was certainly Professor Clubber's article in the *Astronomical Journal* two years earlier in which he said that if and if and if, the sun was going to fry at least the four nearest planets to crisps very soon. But who reads the *Astronomical Journal?*

No, it was a year before the possible end of the world was publicized even enough for crackpot cults to spring up — and God knows that doesn't take much publicity.

The trouble was, at first it was more or less all-inclusive. Not only Earth, but Mercury, Venus, Mars and the asteroids as well. That was as far as any spaceship from Earth had gone so far. Some day someone would land on one of the satellites of the bigger worlds, but not in time to affect this problem. So at first there was no question of any refuge. No preparations were made — there was nothing to prepare for. And priceless months were wasted.

The sun wasn't going to become a nova, or anything like that. It was only going to burn a little brighter for a while, like an open fire suddenly collapsing on itself and shooting out spurts of flaming hydrogen. Astronomers on distant worlds, if there were any, would have to be advanced indeed before they would change Sol's brightness index as a result of any observations they might be making.

It was such a tiny change, astronomically speaking, which the sun was going to make that one could understand why cults like the Sunlovers started. The first I heard of this group it was a thousand strong. When I checked on the figure it was three million. A week later there were over a hundred million members of an international Sunlovers' Association.

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What the Sunlovers were going to do was just get used to the change before it came. They flowed to the tropics. They found the hottest spots on Earth. The SunA embraced sunbathing, primitivism, nudism, Egyptology, swimming, anything remotely connected with the sun. The SunAs, as they called themselves (pronounced Sunays) soon had a routine in which clothes were ceremoniously torn to pieces and the body was offered to the sun.

Well. But don't let's be hard on the SunAs. Fully 95 per cent of them were sane, sensible people — it was only the extremists who carried out those stunts like walking through fires and burning ice factories and giving birth to children out in the blazing sun and publicly branding their breasts with the SunA sign by sunrays focussed through giant magnifying glasses.

Most of the SunAs were people who thought that if they took the step of converting their environment from, say, furclad Alaska to bathing-suited Bermuda, they would have gone part of the way to being ready for the admittedly tiny increase in radiated solar energy. They didn't get up before dawn to pay their respects to the sun; or if they did, it was out of politeness, not to the Sun God, but to the more fervid SunAs around them.

What the SunAs couldn't or wouldn't understand was that astronomical temperatures, even solar-system temperatures, ranged from −273° C to 20,000°C, and humanity was only comfortable between 10 and 30. Certainly people could exist at below-zero and above-blood-heat temperatures. But while nobody wanted to claim accuracy to a degree or two, there was unquestionably going to be no place left on the surface of Earth where water would remain liquid. . . .

Then there were the Trogs, who weren't so much going to get used to the new conditions as run away from them. Basically, if the aim of all the Trog societies must be reduced to its simplest terms, they were going to dig holes in the ground. Oh, certainly some of the Trogs were scientists genuinely planning on survival in a 250°–500°C world. They were working on a basis of shelter, to equalize temperatures; refrigeration, to convert the energy of heat to the task of keeping a few cubic feet cool; hydroponics, for food and water — all the obvious things. The only thing was, it was like trying to move a mountain with a wooden spade. It wasn't going to work. Undoubtedly some Trogs were going to live longer than anyone else when the heat really came on, but that was all — minutes, hours or days. There just wasn't time to find out how to make a bubble which one could never leave in a 300°C world and keep it at what had once been normal Earth temperature. Our science was a caveman technology — we knew about lighting fires and staying warm, but our only solution when there was too much heat was to go somewhere else.

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Yes, it was a pity we worked on wrong premises for so long. Until well on in July there was still room for doubt; but then two things were shown conclusively. One was that life would cease on Earth on or about September 18; the other was that Mars, instead of sharing in the disaster, would almost certainly be more habitable after the solar change than before.

It was a double blow. Before that, people could refuse to believe that the world was in any danger. After it, there was the knowledge that *some* people would live. The law of survival became Mars At Any Price.

A few people who moved quickly enough actually gave themselves life simply by booking passages to Mars. But very soon the survival of the human race was organized. The planners and statisticians got to work. And about their deliberations and premises I know nothing.

The edict was that 1 in 324.7 people could go to Mars. That was pretty damn good, we were told. It could only be achieved by having every machine plant that could possibly be used for the job feverishly producing anything that could prise itself off Earth before it was too late.

Pretty damn good it might be, but it meant that 324 out of every 325 people all over Earth were going to die.

Somehow one person out of every 300 or so had to be picked out for a chance to live on a strange world. And the job had been given, rightly or wrongly, to the men who were actually to take them to their new home.

There wasn't much time for argument. Friday, September 18, was deadline. For a few hours after noon on Friday the real spaceships, the ships properly built before the heat was on, would be landing and taking away extra cargoes of human beings. But by noon Friday all the rush jobs, the lifeships made in desperate haste for one trip only, would have to be clear of Earth. Otherwise they might as well stay where they were.

So they sent us out — *us*, the men and women who happened to be able to handle a ship — to collect the ten people who would go with each of us.

See what I mean about needing a library for the whole story? The details of how agreement was reached on that point would make a book.

We weren't anything special, the newly appointed gods who had to pick ten people out of 3,250 or so. It just so happened that the way to get most people off the Earth was to build thousands of tiny ships into which eleven people could be packed. A little more time, and perhaps mighty ships could have been built, and a different method of selection employed.

Anyone who had any hope of being able to handle a lifeship was given a command. I had been a radio officer on an expeditionary spaceship. At that I had a better background than some of the men and women who were going to try to take lifeships to Mars. Mary Horner, the stewardess on the exploration ship, had a command, I knew.

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In the end, of course, the real shortage wasn't of lieutenants, but of lifeships. Otherwise they'd have had training schools set out to turn out space pilots in a hurry (normally, it only took five years).

I had been given Simsville, which was just big enough to supply a lifeship complement and no more. I'd never been there before, of course. Lieutenants were invariably sent where they knew nobody.

And four days before takeoff, I had my list of people who were to live.

The Powells. They were Mr. and Mrs. America Junior. Fred Mortenson, the brash, clean-limbed young hero-to-be. Harry Phillips, who wasn't quite sure it was right for people to go dashing away from the world that gave them life, merely because it was now going to bring them death. Little Bessie Phillips, who didn't know what it was all about (who did?). Miss Wallace, a schoolteacher and a good one. People like her would be needed. The Stowes, Mr. and Mrs. America Senior, and Jim, their son. Leslie Darby.

Because Leslie was going, Pat would stay. Don't allow for what you think the rest of you are going to do, I'd been told, with all the other lieutenants of lifeships. But it was difficult to escape the idea that there would be plenty of young and beautiful girls on the list for Mars. So I had only one in my ten.

I had only three things to worry about now.

One: staying alive till I left Simsville. There were fanatics now; later there would be disappointed, angry, terrified people who would sink themselves in a mob.

Two: getting my ten away from Simsville. That wouldn't be easy, despite what I'd been told and the arrangements which had been made.

Three: getting my lifeship to Mars. But that, the most difficult and important, was the one which worried me least. That was me and an untested, hastily built ship against space. The others were me against my fellow men.

## III

The three clergymen were met together at Father Clark's house when I arrived back in Simsville from my brief holiday in Havinton. When Father Clark ushered me in there was that uneasy silence that comes when a group's frank discussion of someone is interrupted by the arrival of the someone.

The Reverend John MacLean was heavy and blunt. "Let's waste no time, Lieutenant Easson," he said. "You probably think your time's valuable, and I know I think mine is. Will you start the ball rolling, or shall I?"

I sat down and tried to feel at home. "You, I think," I said. "Why do you want to see me, anyway?"

"First," said MacLean briskly, "let's get one thing cleared up. We don't expect —"

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"I know. You don't expect to go, but . . . But what?"

"Isn't that a little unnecessary?" asked Father Clark gently. "I know you must have found it necessary to adopt a defensive, even a suspicious attitude, Lieutenant Easson, but —"

"Sorry," I said. "Trouble is, it seems years since I could talk to anyone in a straightforward way." I had a good look at them. Cynically I had half expected that they would be squabbling among themselves, but I could see no sign of that.

"That's part of our reason for wanting to talk to you," said Pastor Munch. He was one of those little men with astonishingly deep voices. The room seemed too small to contain his vibrating organ tones. One was inclined not to notice what he said, so fascinating was the sound of it. "You see," he went on, "the three of us here, Lieutenant Easson, feel we are responsible for Simsville. That is our success and our failure. We are not big enough to be responsible for the whole world. We must limit our sphere to be effective. I'm purposely not talking theology — my point is simply that anything which happens to the people of Simsville happens to us. And anything which is *going* to happen we must carefully examine and test and if necessary explain to our people."

"Exactly," said MacLean briskly. "You are an instrument of God. Sometimes the phrase has been used as an excuse. Instrument of a higher power. A shrug of the shoulders. Nothing can be done but accept."

He leaned forward and tapped firmly on the arm of my chair. "That attitude is apathy," he declared. "And apathy is anti-God. We feel, all three of us, that it is up to us to examine and test and if necessary explain, as my colleague says, this instrument of God. We can help or impede. Or we can guide."

MacLean's blunt, though not unfriendly, approach demanded frankness. "You mean," I said, "you can help or impede or guide *me*."

"There is no question," said Father Clark quickly, "of impeding."

Munch murmured assent, the rumble of a distant avalanche. MacLean said nothing, staring back at me.

"I didn't want this meeting," I admitted, "and I delayed it as long as I could. That was because I was prepared to promise nothing."

MacLean nodded. "You came with your mind made up, in fact," he said.

I nodded too. "Half made up, anyway."

Father Clark almost wrung his hands. He was too kindly to like this kind of plain speaking.

"What did you think," asked MacLean, "that we might ask you to promise?"

"To take all the saints," I said bluntly, "and leave the sinners."

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I hadn't noticed Munch's eyes before. They were very soft, brown, very sincere. They met mine and I wasn't quite happy. "Of course you will take the saints," he said, "and leave the sinners. But you did not think, did you, that we should insist that only we knew the difference?"

"I shall take whom I like," I said flatly, "on the basis of my own conscience."

Pastor Munch nodded. "That is what I meant."

MacLean nodded too. "I don't think you've been thinking straight, young man," he told me. "On your main job, yes. Perhaps you have. On the part we would play, no. How could we possibly dictate to you in any way what you should do? It's a waste of time for us to decide what we would have done if things had been different. I've heard about you. I've seen you once or twice. I know you're going to do your best. Therefore you're the best possible instrument, and if I'd had anything to do with your selection I'd have chosen you."

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, unreasonably ashamed of it. Munch met my eyes again, and his own softened still more.

"We understood your burden," he told me, "but we weren't quite certain that you did. I am glad you do. You must realize its weight before it begins to lighten."

More was said, and I think there were handshakes and blessings and promises of any help I needed. But I don't want to go into that.

These three were not only priests of God; they were good men.

## IV

I stepped straight from peace into hell.

I had seen signs that made it plain there was going to be trouble in Havinton. For that matter there was going to be trouble everywhere. But in Simsville, with only 3,000 population, I had thought I was lucky. A crowd in Simsville — even a mob, if it became that — could only contain 3,000 people. A mob in Havinton could be 13,000 strong — and that's pretty strong.

But as I reached the town square on the way back to my hotel from Father Clark's house I found things could be pretty bad in Simsville too.

Our first riot was raging in the square. I stood and watched. I was safe, comparatively. No one but a madman was going to harm the one man who could give him life.

There was nothing to indicate the reason for the fight. Probably no one knew it. Frightened people are angry people; and if a man is angry enough, a remark that it might rain is enough to start a fight.

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Watching it sickened me. If I'd had any real authority I'd have tried to stop it; but I was nothing, and nobody could stop it. I had no backing. The police were there in the fight — whether as police or just as contestants I didn't know.

I'd never seen a really dirty brawl. I'd never seen men throw children aside, drag women about by the hair, kick unconscious men in the ribs and stomach, and tear at each other with their nails. I didn't want to see it. I moved to go, and then realized it was still my job to pick ten people out of this rabble. It was part of my job to watch.

Brian Secker had a man I didn't know on the ground and was battering his head on the concrete. That was manslaughter, or very soon would be. Could I take a man I knew to be a killer to Mars? Secker came off the list of improbables and went on the list of impossibles. That was the only punishment I could inflict, and he would never know.

Harry Phillips was in the fight, but not of it. He was ignoring mere brutality and doing what little he could to stop anything worse. That was no surprise. I knew Harry. His place on the lifeship was confirmed.

I could see Mortenson on the other side of the battle, but he was fighting with a smile on his lips. To him a fight meant fun, not terror or torture. He fought men his own size. My gaze passed on.

It was a shock to see Jack Powell battering Al Wayman to a pulp. But than I saw Marjory lying unconscious beside them, and turned elsewhere.

I started towards Pat. She was almost hidden by three men. But past her I saw Leslie, trapped in a corner with half a dozen children she had gathered behind her for safety. I went to her instead. The three round Pat were only tearing her clothes, and that was to be expected.

But when I reached Leslie she screamed and pushed me towards Pat.

"They won't hurt her," I said. "She's —"

"You fool!" Leslie shouted at me. "Look at them not hurting her. Naturally they'll hurt her — kill her if they can. Haven't you the sense to see that?"

I turned, and then Leslie didn't have to urge me. They were using Pat as a punchball. People who can't defend themselves any more can very soon be punched to death. Particularly women.

I couldn't drag them off. I could only go and show them I was there. They could have killed me. But the knowledge that their only chance of life depended on me sobered them, and they slunk away. Pat was on the ground, unconscious.

I picked her up and took her to Leslie. She was breathing. She would live, no doubt. The children behind Leslie stared.

Pat opened her eyes. "God, what hit me?" she gasped. Then she saw the

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gaping children behind us. "Turn your backs, kids," she said. "You're too young for this kind of show."

She was hurt less seriously than anyone would have thought.

Leslie pulled her dress over her head and helped me to get it on Pat. "That makes you Exhibit A in the peepshow, Leslie," Pat observed. "Never mind, my need is greater than thine."

The fight was suddenly, for no apparent reason, all but over. People disappeared like snowflakes in the sun.

That was our first fight, and very nearly the worst. People hadn't realised, till then, what could happen when such a fight started among men and women who had only four days to live. They hadn't known that they themselves would be ready to kill, and others to kill them.

Pat couldn't walk, but she was very easy to carry. It was safe now to send the children home. They went with backward glances at us. Already, so little impression had the fight made on them, curious little sniggers passed among them.

As I picked Pat up, I half turned to Leslie, frowning. The kids were giggling as if at a dirty joke, not quite understood. Leslie was a schoolteacher, and perhaps precocious youngsters found prurient amusement in the sight of her dressed like a lurid magazine cover. But I had heard those sniggers before, when Leslie wasn't around.

She read my thoughts. "It's not me," she said with an embarrassed grin that made Pat leer up at me. "It's you."

"Me?" Just in time I stopped myself twisting to see if there was a hole in my pants or something.

"The schools were closed," said Leslie, "because it seemed silly to keep them open. Because teachers couldn't be bothered. Because parents wanted their children with them. But we weren't allowed to tell the children why the schools were closing."

"I know. Mad, of course — why try to keep it a secret that the world's going to end on Friday?"

Leslie nodded. She was talking very quickly, trying to keep my attention on what she was saying and off her body, I suppose. She needn't have been ashamed of it. It was slight by most standards, but sweet.

"Yes, but you see?" she went on rapidly. "We're told not to tell them, so they learn about it from each other, in dark corners, as something shameful. Some parents, of course, are wise, and explain simply. But others run away from the problem and let their children learn the truth as a misty horror. . . ."

I could work out the rest for myself. It was foolish to try to hide this new fact of life and death from children; but it was no surprise that people tried

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it. They forgot, or didn't realize, that while one could conceal facts from children, one could never conceal tension. And it centered in me.

I was taking Pat to my hotel, which was quite close. I shrugged off the problem of the children — I couldn't carry everything. But I remembered something else which had aroused my curiosity even in the middle of the riot.

"What did you mean, Leslie," I asked, "when you said naturally they'd hurt Pat and hadn't I the sense to see that?"

Leslie went red as I looked at her, but it wasn't a blush of embarrassment this time. She said irritably, "Don't be a fool, Bill." She was right. I was a fool. I should have known.

I looked down at Pat. "You know what she's talking about?" I asked, more to get her mind off her bruises than anything else. But Pat didn't know, and said so.

"They knew Pat was sure of a place on the lifeship," Leslie said suddenly, bitterly. "Naturally they wanted to kill her. I can even see their point of view myself."

Pat tried to laugh, but gave it up. "Tell her, Bill," she said weakly.

But it was important that no one should know he was going to Mars, or not going. People could become desperate when they knew there wasn't any chance. Even Pat, despite what she said.

So I said noncomittally, "Nobody's sure of his or her place, Leslie. Until Thursday night, when eleven of us leave here, no one knows that he'll go or stay. You can see it must be like that if you only think about it for a minute."

Leslie frowned. We were in the lounge of my suite. I set Pat down on a sofa. "But . . ." Leslie said.

Pat really laughed this time. "Still don't believe it, Leslie?" she said mockingly. "Listen. Bill and I have never discussed this, except when I told him, right away, I didn't expect to be one of the ten. I don't say I want to die — who does? But if Bill won't tell you straight, I will. He wouldn't take a girl like me to Mars. If he did, he wouldn't be Bill. So I can just carry on being myself without trying to buy myself a place on the ship by being someone else. See?"

Leslie nodded, incredulously. "I'll go and call the doctor," she said. I threw out a shirt and a pair of slacks for her, without a word.

"I'd think more of her if she believed you," I said, frowning, when she had gone.

"Can you expect her to?" Pat asked wryly. "We're always together. We . . ."

But she found talking not worth the effort, and stopped.

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I thought Pat had come out of the affair better than Leslie, and the frown didn't come off my face. You could judge people by what they believed of others. Was I making a mistake?

Or was Pat, after all, putting up a magnificent bluff, for the highest stakes of all?

## V

I had a caller next morning before I was properly awake. Pat, as I had suspected, was tough. She was up and moving about, in a green silk dressing gown of mine, ordering breakfast, and introducing the famous feminine touch to the suite.

She had stayed in the apartment. There was nothing in that. If desperate people wanted to kill her and only I could protect her, it was obvious that she should stay with me. But when I heard the knock I nodded towards the bathroom.

She shook her head definitely. "It's probably only Leslie," she said, without lowering her voice. "Besides, the less openly a thing's done, the more weight people give it. A whiff of my perfume — and I use very strong perfume, haven't you noticed? — no sign of me, and it would be settled beyond doubt. Everyone would know you were taking me along."

The truth of the matter was, she just didn't want to hide. She had crossed to the door as she spoke, and opened it.

It was Mortenson. The door hid him for a second or two, so I didn't see his reaction when Pat opened the door to him. By the time he was inside he was taking her presence for granted. Mortenson was never discomposed by anything.

"Say, Bill," he said in his easy, friendly manner. "After what happened yesterday, don't you think you could use some help? I mean, you're all on your own here. Pat doesn't count when the broken glass starts flying. Suppose I move in with you?"

I considered it. There might be times when I'd be glad of Mortenson around. But I knew I was right in having as little as possible to do with the people I had already chosen. The case of Pat proved it, though I hadn't chosen her. Everyone about me was suspect. I didn't want Mortenson, the Powells, Leslie and Harry Phillips to be found in an alley with knives in their backs.

"Smart, Fred," Pat remarked admiringly. "Just in case Bill hasn't had a chance to appreciate your sterling qualities, you want to hang around and give him the opportunity. You needn't worry. He knows what a great guy you are."

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He admitted his motive without a trace of irritation. Mortenson was always easy, friendly, natural. "The thought had crossed my mind," he said. "How about it, Bill?"

"Better not," I said, and explained why, without telling him he was on the list. He nodded. "Reasonable," he admitted. "More than that, you're perfectly right. Announce the names of the ten people who're going with you, and it's the National Bank to one peanut not more than one of your ten would be alive the same night. Say, Pat, if Bill won't take my offer — when you want to go out and Bill isn't around, give me a ring, will you? I don't pretend I'm crazy about you, but I'd hate to see you after that swan-white neck of yours had had an interview with a meat-axe."

Pat shuddered. "You put things so realistically," she said.

Before he went Mortenson warned me that he wouldn't be the last caller I had that morning. "I came early to get in first," he said frankly. "I know Miss Wallace is coming to see you, and the Powells, and Sammy Hoggan —"

"Sammy!" I exclaimed. "Can he walk?"

"I knew you'd underrate Sammy," said Mortenson, shaking his head. "Nearly twenty-four hours ago he went out flat. Now, apart from a head he'd be glad to sell if anyone would buy it, he's the old Sammy. Suddenly realized the girl wasn't worth it."

Knowing he couldn't leave a better impression by staying longer he went out and closed the door quietly.

Mortenson was a puzzle — which meant, of course, that I didn't quite understand him. I can't hope to convey the principal thing about him when you met him — the impression he gave of being larger than life, of having done and seen everything. He was the man of ten talents. After he had gone one wondered what was so startling about what he had said and done; but one never wondered that at the time.

I looked at Pat quizzically. "You don't like him," I said.

"On the contrary," she retorted flippantly, "I've been in love with him for years. Now and then he's even acknowledged it in passing."

"You don't sound as if you loved him."

"Think hard, Bill. Can you imagine me sounding as if I were in love with anybody?"

That rang the bell. Pat had grown up in a school of life in which the first rule to be learned was: Show your feelings, and someone will slap you down for it.

"You wouldn't like to tell me about it, would you?" I asked.

"There's nothing to tell. What does a lady tell a gentleman about another gentleman?" She was very bitter over the words *lady* and *gentleman*. I said nothing, hoping she would fill the silence with words. Presently she did.

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"I threw myself at him," she said. "I didn't know any better. But it didn't matter, for he was kind and understanding. He caught me and put me down gently. That's all you can ask of anyone, isn't it? This was when I was seventeen. I tried again, and this time he didn't put me down gently. He held me for quite a while, and when he did put me down it wasn't exactly gentle. By this time he was a little bored with me. I was demanding, you see."

I could hardly imagine Pat being demanding. But maybe I was hearing about a different Pat. Most of us are a lot of different people in the course of our lives.

"Don't blame him," she went on. "Whatever you do, don't blame Fred. That would be unjust." I didn't know whether the irony in her voice was applicable to what she was saying at the time, or just to her life. Her whole life, I thought. "After all, did *you* duck? Well, the same thing went on happening over and over again. Exactly the same thing. Fred and I meet, as if for the first time, and play the same old broken record."

"Why?" I asked bluntly.

"Easy," she said lightly. "Because that's the nearest I can get to being happy. And because Fred isn't made of asbestos."

She had said all she was going to say on the subject, but I didn't need any more. It was one of those stories that begin: "Things would have been so different if . . ." Maybe they would; what always seems to me to matter is what things are, not what they might have been. But I couldn't help breaking my own rule and wondering if things would have been different if Pat and Sammy had got together, as they obviously never had.

"How come you didn't know about this girl of Sammy's?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Never had much to do with Sammy. He and I started off on the wrong foot a long time ago, I guess." She gave a hard laugh. "It happens with the nicest people sometimes."

We had just finished breakfast when the Powells arrived. They weren't in the least surprised to see Pat, but her presence seemed to bother them. So after a while she went into the back bedroom.

The Powells still had trouble coming to the point. I hoped they weren't going to break down and beg me to take them to Mars because Marjory was going to have a baby, or for any other second-feature reason.

It was Marjory who managed to tell me the reason for their visit at last, though not without more hedging. She was polishing her fingernails very carefully, stopping now and then to pull her perfectly straight skirt straight. "We didn't want to say anything about it," she said, "because we didn't think it would matter anyway, but all the same we felt we ought to — you understand, don't you? Just in case. It's only fair."

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I waited, knowing that anything I said would only be an excuse for more circumlocution — they would explain in great detail that they didn't mean *that*.

"I said there wasn't any chance of your picking us," said Marjory, "but Jack said after all, you might. So we thought we'd better tell you not to. Not that it was likely, but —"

"Why?" I asked bluntly. "You mean you want to die?"

"I mean I can't help it," said Marjory simply. "I'm too great a risk, Bill. I had a miscarriage once and the doctor told me another pregnancy would kill the child and me."

"You think only people who can have children should go?"

"It's more than that, Bill. It didn't seem to matter. . . . I'm pregnant now."

"I see," I said.

"Of course you may think we had our nerve thinking you were going to pick us out," said Marjory quickly. "It's not that. It's just that you had to know, in case."

There was nothing for me to say. Could I tell them they had been on the list? Obviously not. Would it make them feel any better if I said they'd never been seriously considered? No. I could only murmur stupidly that I was sorry. It wasn't what I had expected, but it was still second-feature stuff.

Pat came back as soon as the Powells had gone. I told her about them and went on, "I wonder why everybody's chosen this morning to come and tell me these things?"

"Easy enough," Pat replied. "Five people died in the fight yesterday. Twenty-four more went to hospital. Six were sent to the county jail, to come up in court next Monday. Only there probably isn't going to be a next Monday, so they won't see anything more in their lives but their cells. People suddenly realize that this isn't just a nightmare that will be over tomorrow morning. This is Tuesday. If they haven't convinced you by Thursday night that you ought to take them to Mars, they're going to die."

I was more interested in Pat than in what she said. I remembered that there were now two vacancies for Mars. There was no argument with what Marjory had said. I couldn't give one of those priceless places on my lifeship to someone who might die in a few months, or, worse still, become on Mars an invalid who would have to be looked after.

I didn't want to see anyone else. I wanted to sit down and think. But the procession went on.

Miss Wallace had early lost all sign of youth and become ageless. I knew she was only 30, but she could have passed for 45 or 50, if she set her mind to it.

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The reason for her visit was to make a plea that Leslie Darby should go.

"You may think she's young and frivolous," said Miss Wallace earnestly (quite unnecessarily, for Leslie was obviously young and no one but Miss Wallace would have thought her frivolous), "but if you haven't seen her with children, take my word for it she has a very special gift. That will be needed in a new world. Sometimes I'm afraid, Lieutenant Easson — I hope you don't think this is presumptuous — that you and other young men like you will build up a Spartan colony — hard, brave men and women with no time for the softer things of life. Perhaps that is right. Only I feel that the children in such a world will grow up harder and braver still, and a new race will be born that will be cruel and ignorant and —"

"I don't think any of us want that, Miss Wallace," I told her. I got rid of her soon afterwards, for after all she was wasting her time and mine. Leslie was going. So was Miss Wallace, though she seemed to have no thought of that. Besides, I had an uncomfortable feeling her sincerity would weaken me and make me say something I might regret.

"Let's go out," said Pat. "Otherwise everybody in Simsville will come."

"Well, don't you think I ought to see them?"

"You're not their pastor."

"No, but I can give them life in the hereafter."

"That's almost blasphemous," said Pat. It surprised me. I wouldn't have credited her with a clear idea of what blasphemy was, and I'd certainly never have thought she'd be concerned about it.

"Anyway, I'd like to know what's bothering Sammy," I said. "I'm curious to see him sober. I wonder what he wants."

Pat grunted cynically. "He wants a chance to see Mars, of course," she said. "Now that he's wakened up in a world in which he has only three days to live, he's coming to crawl on his belly in front of you."

I didn't like her to speak like that. One moment she had me on the point of giving her Marjory Powell's place. The next she confirmed my belief that that would be a mistake.

Perhaps I took my job too seriously. Perhaps I thought I really was a god.

## VI

I'd never have guessed in a hundred years why Sammy Hoggan wanted to see me. What had happened to him often happens to people after a hard drinking bout. Suddenly it is all over, they feel like hell, but their brains are ice-cold and emotionless. I've known scientists in such circumstances to come up suddenly, disinterestedly, with the answer to problems that had been bothering them for years.

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He came in, walking carefully, as if his head was balanced on a single pin. He was a different Sammy. He looked at me, then at Pat, then back at me.

"I wonder if I should say what I came to say," he murmured.

"Let's hear it."

"Maybe I should keep it to myself, since it doesn't seem to have occurred to anyone else. But it's a disturbing thought, and you might be able to settle it for me. If you can't, I think I'll go back to the rye, for another reason."

"Everybody's evasive," I complained. "Spit it out."

"Can I ask you a few questions?" He lowered himself carefully into a chair. "How long does it take to build a regular spaceship?"

"Nearly a year."

"How many people could the regular ships have taken off while there's still time?"

"I don't know. A few hundred. About one in 5,000,000 people. What are you getting at?"

"Where's your lifeship being built? Have you seen it?"

It should have been obvious what he was thinking, but I didn't see it. Pat did. She caught her breath and looked at Sammy with horror.

"At Detroit. With thousands of others. The whole place has been evacuated and made into a military reservation. Like Philadelphia and Phoenix and Birmingham and Berlin and Omsk and Adelaide. But you know about that. Yes, I've seen the lifeships. They won't be ready until a few hours before takeoff. No trials. Plenty of them won't get near Mars. Is that what you mean? It's not publicized, but anyone who knows the first thing about interplanetary flight can work that out for himself. So?"

"Suppose only one in 5,000,000 people had a chance of life. What would have happened on Earth?"

"It's not a pleasant thought," I admitted. "That riot yesterday was nothing to what we'd have had, all day and every day, all over the world. But human beings are pretty ingenious when the heat's on. It didn't take long to draw up plans for ships that could be made in eight weeks, when it was really necessary. So what you're visualizing didn't happen."

"Yes," said Sammy quietly. "It didn't happen. Because, as you say, human beings can be pretty ingenious."

I saw at last what he meant, and laughed. He had had me worried.

"You mean that knowing what would happen if only one in five million people could be taken to safety, the high-ups instituted a hoax, to keep the world quiet," I said. "One in 300 is different. It's an appreciable chance. People won't throw it away. They'll be very careful until they know they've lost it. That's it, isn't it?"

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I laughed again. "If there were any real point in it," I went on, "I might begin to believe it. But where's the gain? What would it matter if people all over the world fought and pillaged and looted and murdered? It'll all be the same when the mercury shoots out of the top of all the thermometers."

"There might even be a point," said Sammy. "Who's going in the regular ships? Groups carefully selected — not by pro tem lieutenants whose only qualification is that they know one end of a spaceship from the other. The real ships are taking the essential people, the equipment, the supplies —"

"Naturally, when the lifeships are such a gamble."

"More natural still if none of the lifeships are expected to arrive. Perhaps not even to leave Earth. Don't you see what I'm afraid of? The high-up officials knew that if they told the truth everything would be chaos. Mobs would destroy the ships that wouldn't take them to Mars. They'd kill anyone suspected of being chosen to go. When a ship landed, anywhere, a million people would be swarming round it before the ports opened.

"Now see the way it is. The top officials of all governments can carefully, quietly select the people for the colonies, take them to the spaceports and get them aboard the ships. There may be incidents, but people don't go wild in case they lose their chance of a place on a lifeship. See what a smart, hellish scheme it is? The people who are really going to Mars can prepare quietly, without being disturbed, while a third of the population of Earth is occupied building useless lifeships, and the other two-thirds are busy behaving themselves and trying to catch some tinpot lieutenant's eye."

Pat was worried. I felt a great respect for her and Sammy. I knew — I didn't know how, but I knew they were concerned, not for themselves, for neither expected to go to Mars, but for the duped millions who thought they had a chance when (according to Sammy's theory) they had none.

No use to point out that even if it were true, there might be something to be said for that method of ensuring that as many as possible of the right people should be taken to the new colony. Pat and Sammy were overcome by the horror of a world kept quiet by a cruel lie. I couldn't see it quite the same way, though it concerned me more than them.

I put my arm around Pat's shoulders.

"I won't argue with your theory, Sammy," I said, "though I could. I'll just say this. When you got that idea — had you ever been lower in your life? Weren't you miserable, in despair, half dead? Would you admit anything but the blackest, gloomiest thoughts?"

He grinned wryly. "You may have something there."

"Then suppose you get yourself feeling a little happier about things, and then have another look at this idea. It may look a little different."

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"Pat wasn't feeling low," Sammy retorted. "And she seems to think there might be something in it."

"Pat thinks there's something in everything. On the surface she refuses to believe anything. But that often hides romanticism and imagination. And who said she isn't feeling low? She thinks she's made a mess of her life. She thinks she has no right to go to Mars. She wishes —"

Pat jammed her hand against my mouth, hard. I caught her wrists and scuffled mildly with her. She seemed to feel better after that.

Even Sammy almost smiled.

## VII

While Sammy was still with us the phone rang. Pat took it. She seemed determined that everyone should know she was with me — though what good that would do her I couldn't see. Quite the reverse. But people who set a lot of store on being honest and outspoken are often honest and outspoken when it does no good and a lot of harm.

The call was for Pat, however. She listened, slammed down the phone and turned to us angrily. "Well, what do you know about that!"

"Nothing," said Sammy patiently, "until you tell us."

"That was my aunt. Somebody got into my room last night and destroyed everything — clothes, books, furniture, letters. The whole shooting match. Imagine anyone doing a thing like that!"

Sammy took the practical view. "Their usefulness has only been shortened by a day or two, anyway," he remarked. "Why should you care?"

"But —"

"It's just spite," I said. "Why be surprised, Pat? You're cynical about so many things — it should be no shock that when people hate you they take any small revenge they can."

Pat grinned involuntarily. "No, it isn't really," she admitted. "And as Sammy says, it hardly matters now. But it's pretty petty, isn't it?"

"What an odd juxtaposition," Sammy murmured. "Pretty petty. Pretty petty. Pretty petty."

Pat said she was going over to have a look round. I offered to take her, but surprisingly Sammy stood up and said he'd go with her. He put it neatly, using precisely the words that made any other arrangement impossible. In fact, he cut me out. He must have been feeling a whole lot better than when he came in and talked despondency.

There was a knock on the door so soon after they had gone that I thought they had come back. I threw the door open casually, so sure it was Pat and Sammy that anyone else would have surprised me.

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But I certainly didn't expect the melodrama of three masked men who brushed past me and shut the door.

I wasn't perturbed. Nothing could happen to me. I wouldn't have been so sure of one stranger, for individuals can be mad enough to kill the only man who can save them. But three — they couldn't be as mad as that, in the same way, all at once.

"Now what?" I asked. "More particularly, why?"

They all carried guns. The leader drew his and gestured with it, like a schoolboy.

"We mean to go to Mars, Easson," he said, his voice deliberately muffled. "If you get that clear for a start, we'll understand each other better."

"Then you'd better get out before I recognize any of you," I told them. "Otherwise it's very sure none of you will."

"One of us is going to stick beside you until takeoff. We figure that'll make a difference. We —"

His talking like a cowboy irritated me. For all I knew they might be kids playing a game.

"Get to hell out of here," I told them, "before I tear your masks off. What kind of a fool do you think I am?"

Nobody moved. So I explained the obvious. "If I die, *nobody* from Simsville goes to Mars," I said, a little more patiently. "They won't send another lieutenant now. So that won't help you. If you stick beside me as you say, it can only last until we get to Detroit, and then we'll be split. You won't be able to do anything about that. Then I can have you thrown into a cell somewhere and that's that. If you get me to promise anything — which would be very easy, for I'll say anything you like — it will last only till I know I'm safe. Then the program's as before. Is that clear?"

I looked from one to another of them. "Okay," I said. "You know where the door is. You just came in."

They went. As easily as that. I gave them credit for having realized before they came that that was probably what would happen. I couldn't really blame them for trying. I might have been weak enough and stupid enough to fall in with their plans. But it was a poor effort.

I'd had enough of my room. I went out to go to Henessy's. I saw the Stowes out with Jim and waved to them. They waved back tentatively. They belonged to the small group who still cared a great deal about what people would think. They didn't want anyone to say they were fawning on me, begging for what everyone wanted.

I saw Betty Glessor and Morgan Smith, who haven't been mentioned so far because I never thought of them. I had exchanged about ten words with them. But they were next on the list to the Powells.

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That's what it came to in the end. The more I learned about people, the more likely they were to come off my list. Perhaps Smith was a drinker and a doper and a sadist and a killer — I hadn't time to find out. I didn't know he was any of these things, so I could take him to Mars.

Tentatively I scratched out the Powells and marked in Smith and Glessor.

Still looking after them, I almost ran into Leslie. She had no job, now that school was closed. She grinned. I stopped, having nothing to say, but no reason to walk past her when she seemed to want to talk.

"What are you doing?" she asked — a silly question if ever I heard one.

"Just killing time," I said.

"Like me to help you?"

"If you have any bright ideas."

She knew a little place down the valley I hadn't had a chance to see. She said it was a good place to think of when remembering Earth.

It was curious, I'd never thought of that. Perhaps because I'd lived in three country districts and four cities before I was ten, I had never felt any duty to any one place. I hadn't thought much about leaving Earth for ever. I had realized vaguely that Harry Phillips would do so with a pang; but if everybody left on Earth was going to die, I was going to leave it without any regrets. What was Earth, anyway? Just a place. Define planets generically, and you had Mars and no loss on the deal that technology couldn't make up in a hundred years or so.

But as Leslie spoke I understood that no other planet would ever be made the same as Earth.

We stopped about two miles from Simsville, and there was no sign anywhere of mankind. Two hills folded in on us, hills thickly wooded. A stream meandered one way, then the other, in its search for lower ground. The clouds were very white and still against an almost tropical blue sky.

I found for the first time that though I had no eye for beauty I could let it sink in and something in me appreciated it.

Leslie was wearing a watered-silk blue dress, and I could appreciate that, too. It darkened her fair hair. I had always liked blue and gold.

"I wish . . ." said Leslie.

We had sat down in the shade, and she was leaning forward, her legs drawn up in front of her, pulling at her ankles.

"What do you wish?" I asked obligingly.

She seemed to have forgotten. "Why was it done like this?" she demanded.

I was disappointed. I had hoped I was getting away from Simsville and my job and its responsibility.

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"How can one person get to know over 3,000 people in fourteen days?" she went on. "You know you can't. You haven't tried. Oh, I don't say you aren't conscientious. I think you are. If you could have arranged the method of selection, all over the world, how would you have done it?"

I shrugged. "Phone book, I guess."

"How do you mean?"

"Every three hundred and twenty-fifth name."

Leslie caught her breath as if I'd suggested setting fire to a cathedral. "You *couldn't*!" she exclaimed. "That would be horribly callous."

"Why? It would be fair."

"But this way . . . at least there's a chance. The good, the wise, the clever, the beautiful *may* come through. . . ."

"For God's sake!" I ejaculated, shocked by her lack of understanding. "Do you think that's what we're supposed to do? Take all the crowned heads in our thousands of little arks and ignore the rabble? Intellectual or artistic snobbery is no better than social snobbery. If I had Beethoven and Michelangelo and Napoleon and Madame Curie and Shakespeare and Helen of Troy and Saint Peter here in Simsville, do you think I'd pick them?"

"Wouldn't you?" She had lost her horror, and in its place was a vast surprise.

"Suppose I did, what would happen to John Doe? Sure, if Simsville had a genius, I'd consider him. There aren't too many geniuses. But when it's one out of three hundred, we're not going to blot out the average man and woman by taking only the people who would come out at the head of a competitive examination in something or other. I . . ."

I didn't have the eloquence I needed. I knew I was right. I wanted her to see it. But how could I tell her that outstanding people, after all, were only clever dogs that had learned new tricks, and that John Smith was worth quite as much to himself as Shakespeare?

"Let's talk of something else," I said helplessly. "Or better still, not talk at all."

She nodded, and put her hand casually to her throat.

Perhaps I was to blame as much as she was. I watched stupidly as she did things to her dress, and then became angry when there was no reason to be. After all, what was wrong in wanting to live? Why shouldn't people try anything and everything?

I knew too much about her, and not enough. If it had been Pat . . . well, if it had been Pat it would have been quite different. All I knew was that Leslie wasn't the kind to give herself casually to a near-stranger. And that, instead of improving things, made them worse.

"You brought me here for this?" I asked furiously.

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"Suppose I did?" she said defiantly.

I was wildly, unreasonably angry. I was also, quite irrationally, disappointed. "You think you could buy any lieutenant that way?" I demanded. "We could all of us have screen stars and princesses and models every night, no obligation, without having to bother about small-town teachers. What I should do is take you, and strike you off the list."

She became very still. It was all melodramatic, cheap, stupid. She had been very clumsy in her effort to seduce me, not knowing how it was done. If she had known how to pretend to be in love with me, or at least attracted by me, the cheapness would have gone. But only someone who was ashamed of herself could make the horrible mess Leslie made of it.

"Hadn't you even the sense to see," I said bitterly, "that any of us could have any woman we wanted? Don't you think I've had enough silly offers and proposals? People who promise to do everything I say on Mars, who offer me the equivalent of ten years' salary in whatever currency we use out there, if they have to sweat for twenty years to pay it . . . men who contract to do my killing for me in the colony, help me to set up a State of my own. Damn it, Leslie, isn't it obvious that I must have decided long ago on the only possible thing to do about such proposals — and that's to leave the people who make them behind?"

"You said . . . something that implied you'd picked me to go."

"Yes, I had."

Her head came up sharply and she laughed in my face. "I heard the same thing often when I was a child," she retorted. " 'I was going to give you something, but now I won't.' We all said it. It . . ."

I lunged away from her, back to Simsville. The blue silk dress still lay about her as if she were sitting in a sparkling pool.

## VIII

It was hours, not days now. Very soon the ten who were going with me would be told. Whether they ever reached Mars would depend, among other things, on how well they could conceal their knowledge.

There was another fight in the square. I saw it from my window this time, keeping well hidden, for I didn't want it too definitely known where I was. Nobody wanted to fight, but nobody could help it. Everybody in the town was going to die, except eleven. The temperatures all over Earth were still normal, and the sun looked the same. It seemed incredible that there was nothing to see, hear or feel.

I looked down from the sun to the square just in time to see Jack Powell die. Someone got him down and crushed his neck with his boot. With a sick

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feeling I saw it was Mortenson. Mortenson! In that moment something clicked into place and I began to understand Mortenson.

Favored. Fortunate. Strong, good-looking, healthy. He had so many things, how could he help but have everything he wanted? Like the beautiful girl who told him, in effect, and went on telling him, "Do what you like with me — I love you." People would forgive him for anything. Men liked him, women loved him.

He had hurt Pat. I had known that, but hadn't made any real effort to understand it. She had only talked once about her relations with Mortenson. Of course he had hurt Pat. She had asked for it — the whole world asked for it. Everybody was ready with forgiveness, eager to pardon the magnificent Mortenson.

In four words: he had too much. He had more than he could handle. Over-nurtured, he had gone bad.

I didn't care about the rights and wrongs of the fight, or what had led to Mortenson's snuffing out Jack Powell's life. I would always remember the picture of Mortenson stamping on a man's neck, howling with joy. Mortenson was finished, as far as I was concerned.

Now Marjory would die alone, in sorrow and fear and hate. I would never see her again.

Betty and Morgan appeared, saw what was going on, and ran off down a side street. That was good. They hadn't compelled me to strike them off the passenger list of my lifeship. Sammy was there. He had a gun. Could he have been one of the three masked men? No — they were fools, and Sammy was no fool. Besides, he had been with Pat. Where was Pat?

I must have said it aloud, for she spoke behind me. "Come away from the window, Bill," she said. "It's like dope. It gets you in the end. You're not tough enough."

I brushed my hand over my eyes. She was right; I didn't really know what was going on. At least, I recorded it faithfully enough, but it didn't mean to me what it should have meant.

The list was complete. Mortenson out, the Powells out, Leslie out. She had done something, I forgot what it was, but I remembered that she was off the list. Miss Wallace, Harry Phillips, Bessie Phillips, the Stowes, Jim Stowe, Betty Glessor, Morgan Smith. But that was only eight. Oh yes, Sammy and Pat.

"Pat," I said. "Did I ever tell you? You're going to Mars."

She wasn't surprised, as I had half thought, and she certainly wasn't delighted. She was very calm and serious.

"You really mean that?" she said.

"Of course. I wouldn't joke about it."

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"No. That's what I thought."

"It's not just that you . . ."

I didn't know what she meant, and probably she didn't either. "It's not just anything," I said. "Of the population of Simsville, I don't know anyone who has more right to live than you."

I hoped it was taken as calmly in each case. I wouldn't know. I wasn't going to tell any of them, except Sammy and Pat.

The fight seemed to have stopped, or at least moved somewhere else. There were no shouts or screams as I waited, wondering how the other eight were taking it.

Pastor Munch was visiting the Stowes. That, of course, was the way. I couldn't visit the people I had chosen, I couldn't write or phone or telegraph, and I couldn't send anyone who had been close to me. The three clergymen had offered to help, and this was the way in which they could. No one would interfere with them as they went about visiting people; and I had not been in touch with them often enough or publicly enough for anyone to guess that they were my messengers.

Munch only knew about the Stowes. He hadn't wished to know more.

Father Clark was taking care of Harry Phillips. Harry would be incredulous, I guessed. I had thought all along that, left to himself, he would refuse. But mention of Bessie would shut him up. He would be afraid that if he said anything about himself Bessie might lose her chance.

Miss Wallace was another who might be dumbfounded. Father Clark would tell her, too.

I didn't know how Betty Glessor and Morgan Smith would react when MacLean told them they were going. They were the gamble of the group. But when it came to couples, one had to gamble. It seemed unfair to give half the available places to one family, but families wouldn't be split. That meant either couples who hadn't started to have their children, like Betty and Smith, or couples with only one child, like the Stowes.

There would be plenty of children on Mars. There always were when life for a group began anew. I would marry, naturally. I looked at Pat.

"Can you tell me now who else is going?" she asked. I told her.

"You've done a good job," she said.

I was inordinately relieved. Pat would know. So I had picked on roughly the right people.

"But . . ." she said, suddenly frowning.

"But what?"

"What about Leslie?" she demanded.

"I always meant to take a cross-section. It was always you or Leslie. Not both."

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Now she did look surprised. "But why me?"

"Pat, you always had a low opinion of yourself. You were quite right. You're nothing to write home about. Except maybe for your looks. But the sad thing is, other people rate even lower than you. So you go."

"Lower than me?" she murmured, in strange humility. "That's a pity."

The commonplace nature of her comment seemed the funniest thing I had heard for months. I was close to hysteria, and I laughed until I was sore. A pity that people were such heels. A pity that the sun was going to radiate just the fraction more heat that meant the end of all life. A pity that only ten people in Simsville had a chance of life.

Sammy came in. I took control of myself.

"Glad to see you, Sammy," I said. "You're elected. You're going to Mars."

He nodded. He was another who wasn't surprised. "I thought that might happen," he admitted, "now Mortenson's dead."

"Dead?" I exclaimed.

"You didn't know? I thought you'd be watching from the window."

"Who killed him?"

"I did. If you didn't see what he was doing at the time, please don't ask me to describe it. I always had a weak stomach. And Pat?"

"She goes too."

He nodded again. But he was still thinking of Mortenson. "You wouldn't think that even something like this could change people so completely so quickly," he said.

Pat laughed, unaffectedly this time. "You should know better than that, Sammy," she said. "People don't change. Never. They may be changed, or they may reveal themselves, or we may have seen them wrong the first time. That's all."

"Never mind that," I said. "There isn't much time. Listen. You may have heard a rumor that a plane will pick up the selected people at the park."

Sammy nodded. "Well, there will be a plane," I said, "but that's only a blind. The plane is the escort for a helicopter that'll land here in the square about the same time. Everybody should be at the park. The people who mean to make trouble, anyway. The other eight who are going with us will know by now. They just have to get to the square, that's all. They should be safe so long as they don't give themselves away."

Sammy began to make objections, but I waved them aside rather petulantly. "Don't you think I've had time to see what's wrong with the plan in the last few weeks? It isn't mine. Anyway, what else could have been done? Nobody has more than a few hundred yards to go anyway, except the Stowes, and they'll come in their car. I know . . ."

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Faintly but clearly we heard a plane.

"It's early," said Sammy.

"No. It's got to fly about and circle so that everyone believes it's the plane they've heard about, and they've only got to see where it lands — in the park or anywhere else. There's going to be no trouble, Sammy, unless too many people are smart and realize they're being fooled."

"But they've got a pretty good idea where you are."

"That was always the difficulty. We can't do anything about that — only hope the plane will be a greater attraction."

For long, tense minutes we waited. Then — because there had to be a little time in reserve — I got up. "Come on," I said.

The hotel had had no staff for a long time. The manager had no imagination at all, and he clung grimly to his job and his duties. There were no unauthorized people in the hotel.

We got down to ground level without seeing anyone. Naturally no one would come into the hotel, where they might miss us, when they only had to watch the exits.

The plane was still circling. Once or twice we heard it swoop to land, then climb again. The pilots of those planes had a big job. They had to be psychologists as well as heroes — for, of course, theirs was liable to be a suicide job. Mobs wherever this plan was adopted would tear these pilots to pieces when they learned they were just decoys.

The point was, the people were pretty certain I was at the hotel. Would anything make them leave? Only the conviction that I had somehow eluded them. All I could do about that I had done — have flares lit at the pavilion, flares that would be visible anywhere in Simsville, and would surely make people think that I was at the park, signaling to the plane. The suspense was the cruelest, most effective part of it. People who at first had been grimly determined to wait in the square in the belief that I must appear there must have felt that belief waver and diminish as the plane swooped and flares lit the sky and people hurried past on their way to the park. The grim watchers must have panicked at the thought: *Some of these people must be going to Mars. And here we are watching them go!*

We heard the plane actually land. That, I thought, must break the last resistance of anyone who must now guess he had no chance of life on Mars.

We stepped boldly into the square. It was getting dark — deceptively dark. Even we, expecting it, didn't see the helicopter until it dropped in the square.

There were bodies in the square. It settled among them. I saw Mortenson lying outstretched, his hand straining for a gun he had never reached. He might have lived 50 years more, on another world.

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Then shadows moved. We rushed for the helicopter, and I saw Harry Phillips carrying Bessie in his arms, Betty and Morgan running hand in hand.

Then Pat screamed.

Whether Mortenson had been all but dead or merely stunned didn't matter. He wasn't dead, and he had the gun. I saw Sammy go for his to make another try, and knew he would be just too late. Mortenson knew the time he had, and took careful aim. He could have had any of us — Sammy, who had shot him; or me, without whom no one from Simsville would live, and all would be brought down with Mortenson, who couldn't go himself.

But he chose Pat. Something in his twisted mind made him go for the girl who had loved him.

Mortenson and Pat died together. They were both good, clean shots. There were no last-breath speeches. Pat fell and Mortenson lay still.

I can't explain what I did. I never thought of Pat at all. I merely worked out that Leslie wouldn't be watching the plane, but at home, and I darted across to a phone booth. I dialed and got her at once. "The square, quick," I said, and slammed the phone down. That was all.

## IX

We didn't see much at Detroit. The organization was magnificent. The whole area was a vast clearing-house, the few people who were running things there handling us like so many cans of beans. We had no kit; someone else was looking after that. There was a supply organization which not only took care of the essentials like the problem of how we were going to live on Mars, but also the comparative luxuries like how much of our literature and history and art we could afford to take along. But that wasn't our affair.

We got to Detroit late on Thursday night, were given a meal and swept into cots, all in the same room. We were then cheerfully informed that our meal had been drugged. We saw only two people. Two who would handle . . . how many lifeships' complements? Presumably the people who were keeping things running at Detroit would be collected later by a regular ship.

We slept until 11 in the morning — Friday morning. When we awoke, the world was still the same. We all wondered — I expect everyone did who looked at the sun that morning — whether the whole thing wasn't a mistake after all and life wouldn't go on the same as ever. But the fact was, of course, that we were approaching the last second that scientists *knew* was safe. Nothing would happen, if they knew what they were talking

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about, for quite a while after that — minutes, hours, even a day or two. Even when it did happen at last, on the sun, it would still be eight minutes before Earth knew anything about it. . . .

We had breakfast together, and then with no more than a glimpse of the feverish activity in the hundreds of square miles about us, and the thousands of tiny, gleaming lifeships in the State Fair grounds, Palmer Park, and wherever else there was an open space or one could conveniently be blasted clear, we were aboard. One after another the ships got the signal.

At last it was our turn. I grinned at Sammy as we came unstuck, remembering his fear that the lifeships were a cruel hoax.

Before we were clear of the atmosphere I knew the truth. Fortunately no one else did. I knew it by the way the ship handled, by the amount of fuel I was using, the amount I would still have to use, the amount I had left.

Sammy, in a way, was right. The governments of the world that was to die could have given, say, a million people a sixty per cent chance of life. It was all a question of the time and labor they had. What could be done in so long? But the multiple wasn't big enough. Not if they were to keep the multitudes quiet enough for them to have enough control of things at places like Detroit to run them as they had, without yelling, screaming millions fighting for life.

In the end they'd calculated to give a ridiculously small chance to a comparatively large number of people. One in 324.7, in fact. Enough to keep the world almost sane in those last few weeks.

Maybe I had enough fuel left to shove us past Earth's gravitational pull, maybe I hadn't. That seemed to cover it.

I thought of Father Clark and Pastor Munch and the Reverend John MacLean, still alive, still with their flock — or had their flock, the mob, found out that they had been running errands for me and torn them to pieces? They had trusted me, accepted me — but perhaps they didn't fully realize that I wasn't Simsville's instrument of God only for the three weeks of selection, but beyond that along every inch of the millions of miles of nothing between Earth and Mars.

But they could still trust me. I had promised Sammy and Leslie and all the others life, and it wasn't going to be my fault if they didn't get it.

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*This first published story by a woman who describes herself as "a Pittsburgh spinster and Jill of all trades" seems to us all but unique in supernatural literature in its compression into so small a space of the ritual, the motivations, and the inescapable logic of magic.*

# Carne Vale

*by* EMILIE H. KNARR

THE LAST NOTE of the striking clock came down through the ceiling beams from the empty house overhead. It set a period to the completed invocation.

Although Edna was quite alone, the cellar seemed crowded. The flames of seven candles cast seven shadowy alter egos on the leprous, peeling, whitewashed walls. She stood inert, waiting, but her shadow-selves leaped and quavered and loomed, and cowered again.

Hope drained away; but they came! With fury and clangor, through the dark earth and the stone walls, came the Spirits she had summoned. On unearthly steeds, the Spirits of the Four Quarters of the world.

North came upon a lumbering bear, East upon the fabulous unicorn; West was mounted on an enigmatic griffin. South's mount, a camelopard, had some trouble accommodating its small head and excessive neck beneath the low ceiling until, being incorporeal, it found it could protrude its head into the deserted living room above.

The Spirits dismounted outside the great circular diagram of fire, each in the place assigned him by the ritual. Having bowed to Edna, they stood regarding her diabolically with keen unblinking eyes. Edna returned this gaze eye to eye, her own as level and as steady. It felt good to be so proud.

Witches, she thought, aren't born; they're made. Nobody ever had been tempted or cajoled to become a witch. The Dark Powers also cherish their pride, and it wasn't necessary. There are always enough of the rejected, the shamed, the derided. The human race itself makes converts in its own ranks.

It wasn't hard to find the way. The old rituals are neither forgotten nor hidden. They live in folklore, sleep upon the library shelves, haunt the very words of the language. No. It wasn't hard. Only dangerous and lonely.

The flames leaped protectively between Edna and the Spirits.



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As she looked from one Spirit to the other, their gaze tempted her to throw her security away. On their side of the ring of fire was the sweetness of despair, the ecstasy of pain, and even the blessed restfulness of death.

Edna was sorely tempted; for, in a way, she knew that these were much greater than the thing she had to ask. At such a risk! So small a thing!

Her will almost failed, until she saw anticipation in the Spirits' regard. These were not friends, but bitter enemies.

At last, after a glance exchanged with his fellows, South reluctantly admitted, "We are your servants, Madam. Command us."

With a sigh of thankfulness, Edna voiced her desire. She herself did not hear the words she spoke, for everything that had brought her to this moment recurred at the time of speaking.

Once more she suffered through the gradual inundation of the flesh that had blighted her adolescence. Once more she heard her slim mother commiserating with her lean father, apologising for Edna.

"Never mind. She'll lose the puppy fat when she gets her growth. Nobody on either side of the family has ever been fat!" In a tone of pride! As though the Millers and the Greenes had been slim through sheer native genius!

And more. The hunger of long fasts. The exhaustion of futile exercise. The punishing dishonesty of stays. The probing of doctors, destroying privacy of flesh — and mind. Books instead of parties; jokes instead of love.

It fell to North, the restrained and meager, to do what Edna wanted.

"As you will," he said in a voice no stronger than a frosty sigh. "But I would fail in my service if I did not warn you that it cannot be undone." Then, seeing that she did not mean to alter the command, he made a slight but curious gesture with his left hand. "So be it —"

Edna had not thought there would be pain, but there was. Intolerable and continued pain. Like the accumulated pangs of years that had led up to this; concentrated. When at last the pain relented, Edna opened her eyes. She was beautiful and slim now. Slim beyond all her desires.

Through the eye sockets of her skull, she looked down upon her rib cage, upon the cupped pelvic bones, down along the thigh bones and the shin bones to the arched and delicate foot bones encircled by the linen garment that had dropped from her.

Though she had no eyes now, she saw; all the beauty of the ivory-gleaming bone. A terrible clean beauty, too much to bear. But she was no longer equipped to weep. "What have you done to me? What have you done?"

"Exactly as you commanded, Madam."

"I told you to remove the *excess* flesh!"

"Gentlemen," asked North, appealing to his brothers, "I leave it to you — is that not exactly what I have done?"

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*The laws of primogeniture do not apply to a writer's fictional offspring; a man's first story is rarely the heir to whom he would entrust his future reputation. But, as the fascinating recent anthology by Mystery Writers of America,* MAIDEN MURDERS, *demonstrated, a surprising number of writers do begin by putting their best foot forward, and often in a pace-setting stride. Many and various are the stories by R. Bretnor which you've read in F&SF; now we bring you his first, published in a quality magazine in 1947 and honored that year in Martha Foley's "distinguished" roll. Subtler and quieter than his more recent farces (though just as outrageous in its basic assumption), it's still typically Bretnoric in being delightfully unclassifiable, and in dissecting our times and mores with disarming absurdity; for even in this debut Mr. Bretnor approaches society as (in Chaucer's phrase) the smiler with the knife under the cloak.*

# *Maybe Just a Little One*

*by* R. BRETNOR

MAXIMUS EVERETT, who taught physics at Woodrow Wilson Union High School for nearly twenty years, was the first man to accomplish nuclear fission in his basement. It really wasn't much of a basement either. Along one side was the work-bench, littered with tools and wire and dusty old books. On the other side was an empty birdcage and a stationary tub with a dripping faucet. A couple of shabby trunks stood in a corner next to a broken lawnmower, and some baled magazines the Red Cross people had forgotten to call for were piled up behind the cyclotron.

The final result of his scientific labors pleased Mr. Everett. After observing it quietly for a while, he went upstairs to the kitchen, where his wife was making chopped-olive-and-egg sandwiches. He sat down on a stool, wiped his long bald forehead, and remarked that it certainly was hot in the basement.

Without turning around, his wife assured him that this was not abnormal. "Here in Arizona," she observed, "right near the border, it's always hot in summer."

Mr. Everett did not dispute the point. "Oh, it's not only that," he told her. "I've just been working pretty hard. It's been a tough job." He leaned



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back with a little sigh of satisfaction. "I've invented atomic power, hon."

"So that's what you've been doing," said Mrs. Everett. "I thought it was still perpetual motion." She cut the last sandwich diagonally in half, put some sliced pickle on the platter, and turned around, smoothing her ample apron. Then suddenly she looked accusingly at her husband. "Why, that's ridiculous!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean, *you* invented it? How about Hiroshima?"

"That was different," said Mr. Everett simply. "That was just a big bang. Anybody can invent that kind."

Mrs. Everett — a librarian, and rather dogmatic — showed signs of irritation. "All the *authorities*," she declared, "say that you have to have uranium, and that it's very rare. Then you have to make it into something else, and it costs millions and millions of dollars."

"That's what *they* think," replied Mr. Everett, shaking his head mildly.

"Well, they ought to know, if anyone does!"

"I have the utmost respect for them," he conceded. "After all, their work did help to make mine possible. It's just — well, you see, it's just that I don't need uranium. I discovered a new element about a week ago, and . . ."

Mrs. Everett was wearing the expression she usually reserved for people who tried to explain away overdue books. "Just *how* could you discover a new element when they've all *been* discovered?" she asked bleakly. "And what is it called?"

"*Frijolium*," said Mr. Everett. "I discovered it a week ago Tuesday. And it hardly costs anything."

"Yes, but where did you get it?"

"I made it. That is, I purified it. Pure frijolium, for the first time in history."

"Well, it sounds sort of familiar to me," mused Mrs. Everett. "Frijolium — now wherever . . .?"

"Sort of familiar?" echoed Mr. Everett. "Well it should be! Frijolium. You know, from *frijoles*."

Marriage and the public library had hardened Mrs. Everett; she took it all in her stride. "*Max*imus Everett!" she snapped. "Do you mean to sit there and tell me that you've found a new element in plain old Mexican beans?"

Mr. Everett hooked his thumbs in his belt and tilted the stool back on its hind legs. "We-ell," he said, obviously weighing the question carefully, "it would not be quite correct to say that frijoles *contain* a new element. As a matter of fact, they *are* the new element."

"But frijoles are just beans!" protested Mrs. Everett, rather loudly.

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"Anybody'll tell you that. They contain proteins, fats, and carbohydrates."

"Those substances," said Mr. Everett, "are impurities. Fresh frijoles are 92.733 per cent pure frijolium. I have isolated it. It has a relatively low atomic weight, but is adequately unstable. The nucleus may be split quite readily by . . ."

"Oh, never mind!" cried Mrs. Everett, stamping her foot. "Do you really expect me to believe that? Why, there would have been an explosion."

"No, there wouldn't. I didn't want an explosion. I used the frijolium from one small frijole — that's the minimum critical mass — and it's really quite easy to control. You can turn it on and off just like a vacuum-cleaner."

"Well, I don't believe a word of it! All the experts say atomic power can't be controlled like that."

Mr. Everett shook his head pityingly. "That's what *they* think. I've had it running the washing-machine for three hours. . . . And," he added, "if I didn't turn it off, it would run for almost exactly 72 years. What do you think of that?"

After this, of course, Mrs. Everett followed him back into the basement to see for herself. The washing-machine was busily churning away next to the cyclotron, quaking and rattling just as it always had. Mrs. Everett sniffed. Warily, she walked around it, peering at the chipped enamel of its framework. As far as she could determine, its appearance had not changed — and she said so rather acidly. "If this is your idea of a joke," she said, "I don't think it's at all funny. Of course, if you haven't broken my washer, there's no real harm done, but . . ."

Mr. Everett interrupted her. He pointed to the back of the washer. "Look!" he said, with great dignity.

Looking closely, she saw a small aluminum box, with a round hole in the top and an insulated cord leading to the motor. "Wasn't it there before?" she asked.

"It was not!" said Mr. Everett. "That is the generator. You drop the frijolium through the hole. That little switch on the box works a shield inside that turns the energy on and off." He flipped the switch, and the washing-machine chugged twice and was silent. He flipped it again, and the machine came back to life. "See?" he said triumphantly.

Mrs. Everett was still dubious. "Where do you plug it in?" she inquired.

"You don't," replied her husband patiently. "That's the whole idea. The generator converts atomic power from the smashing of the frijolium nuclei directly into 110 volts A.C., just like the house current."

"You — you mean we won't have any bills to pay?" said Mrs. Everett, beginning to be impressed.

"Not a penny. Not after I get the rest of the house wired."

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"Why, Maxie! Why, that's wonderful! And we could put it on the car too, couldn't we?" Mrs. Everett patted the washing-machine with genuine affection. "Just wait until I tell Mrs. Myers," she exulted. "Ever since they made Henry principal, she's been acting as if we were below them socially or something. And it was she who told the grocer-boy that you were all thumbs, not handy around the house like Henry was."

"Oh, Henry's all right," said Mr. Everett. "I think he'll be pleased when he hears about it. After all, it'll be nice for the school, too; it'll help to keep up interest in the physics classes."

"I should think he ought to be pleased," snorted Mrs. Everett. "*He* couldn't invent atomic power."

"Maybe," said Mr. Everett wistfully, "maybe he'll let me give up coaching basketball."

"I'll phone her right after lunch," said Mrs. Everett, with a gleam in her eye.

Mrs. Everett was as good as her word. She was sweetly condescending to Henry Myer's wife, who responded with a gratifying display of irritation, awe, and envy — and this reaction encouraged her to call up quite a number of other people. It was Saturday, and she didn't have to go back to the library, and so she was able to spend the rest of the afternoon at the telephone. She was still there at 5 o'clock, when the reporters started to arrive.

The first journalist was a brash young man with an unhealthy complexion. "I'm from the *Bulletin*," he announced, cleverly getting his foot in the door as Mrs. Everett opened it.

"There must be some mistake," said Mrs. Everett coldly. "We paid the boy two months in advance, and anyway we take the *Tribune*."

"No mistake," said the journalist. "Here's the card." He thrust a card at her menacingly and, as she retreated, thrust himself after it, craning his neck to peer around the room. "Where's the guy with the atom bomb?" he demanded.

"Oh, you're a reporter!" said Mrs. Everett, wide-eyed.

"Where's the atom bomb?" repeated the journalist, peering into the fireplace.

"Atom bomb?" gasped Mrs. Everett. "Dear me, no. There isn't any. It's just atomic power. It's running the washing-machine."

The journalist seemed disappointed. "You sure?" he said.

"Why, of course," replied Mrs. Everett. "Maximus — that's Mr. Everett — will be here in a minute or two. He'll explain it to you. If you'll just have a seat for a minute, I'll go and get him." She started out. "If you'd like to look at the new *Geographic*," she offered, "it's on the mantel."

The journalist grunted politely as she left the room. Then he took a

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quick look at the bookcase, discovered two volumes by Jules Verne and one by H. G. Wells, noted down their titles. Having done so, he opened the door for his cameraman, and together they began examining Mr. Everett's desk for matters of scientific interest.

Mr. and Mrs. Everett, entering, did not notice this investigation; they were momentarily blinded by the flash-bulb that greeted their return. Mr. Everett tried simultaneously to rearrange his hastily-assumed necktie with one hand and to shake hands with the journalist with the other, and succeeded in looking quite confused and slightly wild. Mrs. Everett blinked and said something about how clever Mr. Everett was. The journalist promptly asked about the atomic bomb again, and did not conceal his resentment when Mr. Everett assured him that there was nothing so dangerous in the house. He slumped down into the nearest chair, muttered indignantly that he had flown down from Phoenix, flipped his notebook closed. "Well," he said to Mr. Everett, "give."

And, modestly enough, Mr. Everett gave. He told of his search for practical atomic power. He exhibited his homemade cyclotron and the converted washer. He posed for a dozen or more photographs, and he answered all questions with the utmost patience. "Of course," he said, "I could have made a bomb if I'd wanted to, but I think this is so much more useful, don't you?"

The journalist made a note of this remark, "Yeah," he said, "sure. But all the big shots say it can't be done for ten or twenty years."

Mr. Everett grinned. "That's what *they* think," he said. "You see, they haven't heard about my new element. It's the new element that does the trick. And it hardly costs anything; that's the nice thing about it."

The journalist poised his pencil.

"I call it frijolium," said Mr. Everett. "From frijoles, you know."

The journalist's face twitched suddenly. He darted a quick, covert glance at his companion. "No kiddin'!" he said, with a nasty smile. "You mean it comes from frijoles — from *beans?*"

"That's right," Mr. Everett assured him. "From common old Mexican beans. They're full of it."

"Say, that's something! That's really something!" The journalist slapped Mr. Everett heartily on the back. "Isn't that *something*, Pete?" he cried.

Pete took another photograph.

The first journalist didn't stay very long after that. He remembered that he was in a terrific hurry, and he delayed only long enough to use the telephone very briefly. Mrs. Everett, overhearing part of the conversation, marvelled at the strange jargon of his craft, ". . . Yeah," he said, ". . . uh-huh, a squirrel . . . but good! . . . sure . . . runs the washer on

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frijolium . . . from frijoles . . . you heard what I said, as in beans! . . . Willie'll eat it up. . . ."

But that was all Mrs. Everett heard, because just then the other journalists started to arrive.

There were a lot of them, male and female, and they gave the Everetts a very busy evening. As a matter of fact, it was two and a half hours past midnight when the last journalist — a heavily-mustached lady who had been questioning Mrs. Everett about the more intimate details of her married life — folded her notes and departed.

After the door had been securely bolted, a strangely demure Mrs. Everett looked up at her husband. "Oh, Maxie," she fluttered, "that woman asked me the most embarrassing questions."

"Dear me," said Mr. Everett uncomfortably. "I wonder why?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Mrs. Everett sighed. "Well anyhow, you'll probably be quite famous now," she suggested. "They . . . they may even ask you to go to Washington."

"That would be nice," said Mr. Everett, "but I don't see how I possibly could before the end of the semester."

Mentally reading future headlines, Mrs. Everett ignored the objection. She glimpsed a brief and garbled vision of honorary degrees, speeches, movie contracts. "All those newspaper people were so disappointed because you hadn't made a bomb," she reflected. "It does seem a shame, too, after they went to all that trouble. Don't you think you could make just *one*? Maybe just a little one. . . ."

"No," said Mr. Everett, "I'd rather not. I don't like to seem obstinate, but whatever would we do with it?"

The Everetts were given no chance to stay in bed that Sunday morning, for the press returned in force on the heels of the milkman, and soon the household was as agitated as it had been the night before. The telephone was constantly in use; light-hearted journalists came and went; and Mrs. Everett whispered a thousand confidences to ladies who knew just how to contrive high romance from the most unpromising materials.

At fifteen minutes to 12, Maximus Everett was perched on the pile of old magazines in the basement, rather hoarsely lecturing on the peculiar merits of the frijole as a fissionable material, while several members of his audience examined and photographed an assortment of rusty plumbing installed for an experiment long since abandoned and forgotten. It was here that Mrs. Everett found him when she descended the stairs to announce the arrival of Henry Myers.

"I do hate to interrupt," said Mrs. Everett delicately but firmly, "but could you come upstairs for a minute, dear? There's *someone* to see you."

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"Tell him to come down," replied Mr. Everett. "I'll start over again so he won't miss anything."

"But it's *Henry!*" protested Mrs. Everett, leaning out over the rickety railing. "He says it's important!"

Mr. Everett came suddenly alive. "Henry?" he cried. "I told you so! He's changed his mind about my coaching basketball. I'll be right up. Tell him I'll be right up! Boys," he said to the journalists, "do you mind waiting down here? Just browse around. I won't be a second."

"Go right ahead," they answered, as one man. And they followed Mr. Everett enthusiastically as he took the stairs three at a time.

Henry Myers was waiting in the livingroom, standing with his broad back to the fireplace. He held his hat in one hand, a folded newspaper and an envelope in the other. His eyebrows slanted down toward the bridge of his nose with administrative severity — and they relaxed neither at Mr. Everett's entrance nor at his hearty greeting.

"Henry, old boy!" At the head of his escort, Mr. Everett swept across the carpet with outstretched hand. "I'm sure glad to see you! Come on down and . . ."

And then Maximus Everett was checked in full career. Henry Myers spoke. His voice was sharp and metallic, an unkind voice, the voice of a man who for years has dealt none too gently with refractory adolescents. "Everett," he said, "I had hoped to see you privately; I see that privacy is impossible. However, I anticipated such a contingency. I came prepared, and I shall do what is necessary without further discussion." He thrust the newspaper and the envelope into Mr. Everett's welcoming hand. "One," he declared, "will explain the other."

Then he turned on his heel, jammed his hat on, angrily brushed aside two questing newsmen — and the front door banged behind him.

Now, quite understandably, this interview knocked Maximus Everett slightly off-center. He stared open-mouthed at the quivering door, only remotely conscious of a buzz of voices, of questions being asked, of objects in his hand — until a voice more strident than the rest made itself heard.

"Let's see!" it shouted. "Let's take a look! Take a look, Maxie!"

So Mr. Everett looked. Mechanically, he started to unfold the newspaper, recalling vaguely that it was the first he had seen since his discovery was made public. As the black headlines appeared, there was a sudden hush.

At first, Mr. Everett only realized that he was reading about himself; though the meaning was seeping through, he was still protected against its full import.

WHOOPS! yelled the headlines gaily, BEAN ATOM BUSTED.

Below that, two lines of smaller type proclaimed: *Frijole Fission Runs*

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*Washer For Basement Einstein: Clean Undies Prove Plutonium Now Obsolete.*

And there, to illustrate the point, was a picture of the Everetts, grinning idiotically as they displayed the significant article of apparel against the side of the cyclotron.

Still functioning mechanically, Mr. Everett by-passed the caption to find the story.

> Mighty forces [he read] which Arizona's old-timers have always suspected to lie lurking in the redoubtable Mexican frijole have at last been liberated, according to Maximus Everett, high school physics teacher and self-proclaimed basement genius of Concho County, who yesterday took the wraps off his home-grown Oak Ridge project for the first time and let everybody in on the swell new world now looming up (says he) on the bean horizon. . . .

Numbed as he was, Mr. Everett might very well have gone on to read the rest of the story, but just then some more black type, off to one side caught his notice:

BEAN-BUSTER MAXIE NO COLD FISH, SAYS MRS.

Atomic Love Brings . . .

But that was as far as Mr. Everett got. Full comprehension, long delayed, hit him with a solid rabbit-punch. The paper fell from his fingers to the floor. A large round tear, forming at the corner of his eye, began to slide slowly down his cheek.

Observing these phenomena, Mr. Everett's audience found it expedient to melt away, motivated perhaps by delicacy, perhaps by an intuitive appreciation of the fact that the really worthwhile part of the show was over. One by one, unnoticed by their host, they made their departure, until only two or three of the unregenerate were left. These waited patiently until Mr. Everett recovered enough to open Henry Myers' letter. Then they read it over his shoulder, finding it brief and to the point:

> My Dear Mr. Everett:
>
> In view of the scandalous events of the past two days, the Board of Trustees has instructed me to notify you of the termination of your contract. The Board is granting you an extended leave of absence (without pay) until the end of the present semester, at which time the termination will take effect.
>
> The Members of the Board and I agree that, under the circumstances, no additional explanation of this action can be necessary.
>
> Very sincerely yours,
>
> Henry T. Myers, *Principal*

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Nobody said anything. After a moment, Mr. Everett carefully folded the letter again and returned it to its envelope. Then he walked to the door and held it open until the last of his remaining visitors had filed out, and only when it was locked behind them did he permit himself a brief outburst of emotion. He tore the letter in half. He threw it on the floor. He said, "That's what *you* think!" angrily several times.

Bean-Buster Maxie was a nine-days wonder. The press, finding him suddenly uncooperative, confined its efforts to questioning friends and neighbors, fell back on its already large store of photographs, and explained the working of the Everett washer by hinting broadly at hidden wiring and compressed air. Before fresher wonders forced frijole fission back through the want-ads into oblivion, its every aspect had been thoroughly explored. There had been several jolly interviews with lesser physicists, several with screen and radio comedians, one with the spiritual leader of a vegetarian cult, and one with a rather bawdy admiral.

But the giants of the scientific and political worlds had held themselves aloof, refraining from all comment. The powers-that-be had not summoned Mr. Everett to Washington. No academic senates had honored him. No universities had invited him to join their faculties. Even the FBI, hastily checking up on all known foreign agents and finding them uninterested, had dropped him from its social register.

During the weeks that followed this brief period of international notoriety, the Everetts kept very much to themselves, scarcely stirring out of the house, and greeting even their oldest friends with a frigid reserve. Mr. Everett buried himself in his work, first converting the house-circuit to frijolium-power, then installing a generator in the family car. Mrs. Everett, who had resigned from the Public Library after a determined but futile resistance, was his constant companion; and many were the long evenings they spent together, reading Walt Whitman aloud and making nebulous plans for a frijolium factory. Even after small boys stopped hooting at Mr. Everett in the street, they hesitated to venture far abroad; only the inexorable operation of economic law finally forced them out of the fancied security of their retreat.

Mr. Everett had never been too provident a man, and people of moderate means who invest in cyclotrons — no matter how small — seldom retain respectable bank balances. After about two months, Mr. Everett started job-hunting. He hunted in person and he hunted by mail, and he found both methods equally fruitless. Whatever he tried, there were — curiously enough — no vacancies. Once he was offered temporary employment as a sheepherder, but this was while he still was relatively solvent, and the chance did not come along again.

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In six more weeks, the Everetts found themselves reduced to exactly 70 cents in cash and a dubious charge account. They discovered this just after lunch, and they moved to the living-room to discuss the matter.

"All this would never have happened," said Mrs. Everett bitterly, "if it hadn't been for that Henry Myers. I warned you against him the first day you met him, Maximus."

"Oh, Henry's not so bad," protested Mr. Everett. "It wasn't his fault, dear, I'm sure. The press just treated the whole thing with such a complete lack of understanding." He shrugged. "Well, I guess we'll just have to take out a second mortgage to tide us over. I hate to do it, but . . ."

"What?" cried Mrs. Everett. "And stay in *this* town? I'd sooner scrub floors! We ought to sell the place, and go away to . . ."

But Mrs. Everett was not fated to reveal her intended destination, for at that instant the doorbell rang. It rang once; then it rang again. It was starting its third summons when Mr. Everett opened the door, blinked into the sunlight, and found himself looking at three strangers — all of whom were dark and obviously foreign.

"What do you want?" demanded Mr. Everett rudely.

There was a tall dark man with a mustache and a black Homburg hat. There was a small dark man with a mustache and a black Homburg. There was a very large dark man with neither.

The tall dark man bowed profoundly over his stick and gloves; so did his small companion. The very large dark man kept his hands in his pockets and looked straight ahead. "Do I address Doctor Everett?" inquired the tall dark man with grave courtesy and a marked accent.

Mr. Everett, who had obtained his B.A. with some little difficulty, was pleased in spite of himself. He blushed, cleared his throat, and coughed affirmatively.

"Then permit me to introduce myself," said the tall dark man, handing him a visiting card.

Mr. Everett took the card. *Antonio L. MacJones*, he read, *Ph.D., LL.D. (Columbia '22), Minister of the Interior, The Raptarian Republic.* "Won't you come in?" mumbled Mr. Everett.

Once inside, the Minister of the Interior presented his colleague to Mr. Everett. "This," he announced, "is our General Troppo. In our country, he is Minister of — of Education."

The general clicked his heels and bowed at Mr. Everett.

"Education?" said Mr. Everett suspiciously. "And he's a general?"

The Minister of the Interior explained that in his tranquil land military rank was largely honorary. ". . . in memory of our great liberator, who died in battle 112 years ago," he added.

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So Mr. Everett introduced them both to Mrs. Everett, who was properly impressed; and everybody sat down except the very large dark man, who stood with his hands in his pockets, and kept peering out of the windows. There was some further exchange of formalities, with flowery Raptarian solicitude for the good health, past, present, and future, of Mr. and Mrs. Maximus Everett. Then the Minister of the Interior spoke at length about what his government was doing for the Common Man, and about a President so well-beloved that no other had been elected for nearly 30 years — and throughout his speech the dove of peace cooed a gentle obbligato.

The Everetts were enthralled. They saw the peaks and plains, the lush groves and verdant jungles of Raptaria. They beheld the clean, hard-working Raptarian peasant leading his chubby children to a new and splendidly-appointed school provided by a government whose watchwords were Benevolence and Progress.

The Minister of the Interior paused, and the Everetts sighed longingly — and as they did so he rose suddenly to his feet, lifting a hand to heaven. "That is why we are here today," he cried out. "So that you, Maximo Everett, can aid us in our great humane task! In our country we have a physicist, a good man. He tells us that his work confirms your wonderful discovery. Already we have formed a Frijole Control Commission! — Come to us! Though we are poor, you will have everything you need. You will be Vice-Minister of Education. You will work directly under General Troppo!"

Having finished, the Minister of the Interior opened his arms in a magnificent gesture of ardent welcome, bowed, and sat down, quite winded by his exertions.

"Ah, not under me!" expostulated General Troppo with equal fervor. "Not under me! Say rather as a colleague, a comrade!" He smiled, radiating good fellowship. "Of course," he said to Mr. Everett, "you can make explosives?"

Mr. Everett frowned, but before he had a chance to reply Mrs. Everett answered for him. "Mr. Everett could make an atomic bomb just as easy as pie," she told the general, "but he doesn't want to. He thinks they're very destructive, and he can't see any point to making them."

Mr. Everett nodded vigorously while the Raptarian dignitaries exchanged swift glances; then the Minister of the Interior stepped into the breach with hearty laughter. "My friend!" he exclaimed, as soon as his amusement had subsided. "My very good friend! I fear that you mistake the general's meaning! What use would we, in poor Raptaria, ever have for an atomic bomb? But we have mines in our mountains. We must build dams across our so-swift rivers. We need many roads and bridges. That is the kind of explosives

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the Minister of Education means — for blasting! Is that not so, General?"

"Yes, yes," said the general hastily —

"But of course," smiled the Minister of the Interior, "for that — and for our national holiday, when the happy people celebrate with fireworks. That is why we may want a very few explosives, though we want power-plants even more."

"Power-plants?" echoed General Troppo. "Yes, yes."

"We-ell," said Mr. Everett, scratching his head, "I guess that is sort of different." He hesitated. "I . . . I won't have to coach basketball, will I?" he asked diffidently.

Some time has passed since the Everetts went to the Republic of Raptaria. As Vice-Minister of Education, Mr. Everett naturally did not have to bother with any of the details of his departure. Everything, including a Raptarian passport for two, had been arranged by the Minister of the Interior, and it all went off very smoothly — so smoothly, in fact, that for a long time even the Everetts' neighbors did not know that they had moved out of town permanently. Nobody ever dreamed that they had gone abroad.

Nobody. Not even Henry Myers, who happened to mention the Raptarian Republic when he delivered his weekly speech on world affairs in the assembly hall of Woodrow Wilson Union High School a few days ago.

". . . and by contrast," he informed the student body, "we have news of another quiet, orderly election in Raptaria, a little country many of you may not even have heard about."

He paused, to smile benignly at the upturned faces. "A lucky little country, too," he told them. "Too small to worry about the great quarrels that rend the world. Too poor," he continued, "to follow any ways but those of peace."

That's what *he* thinks.

Solar systems seldom miss
Planets troublesome as this.

edb, San Francisco *Chronicle*

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*A cat walking across a room swerves suddenly and walks carefully around something we can't see. We shrug, smile, and remark that cats are always doing that. Our hitherto amiable dog suddenly develops the irritating habit of barking and growling violently at certain innocent passersby. We still shrug, wonder what's got into the mutt, and pass it off. Mr. Dick argues with frightening urgency that if we are wise, we will immediately investigate these oddities of animal behavior.*

# Roog

*by* PHILIP K. DICK

"Roog!" THE DOG SAID. He rested his paws on the top of the fence and looked around him.

The Roog came running into the yard.

It was early morning, and the sun had not really come up yet. The air was cold and gray, and the walls of the house were damp with moisture. The dog opened his jaws a little as he watched, his big black paws clutching the wood of the fence.

The Roog stood by the open gate, looking into the yard. He was a small Roog, thin and white, on wobbly legs. The Roog blinked at the dog, and the dog showed his teeth.

"Roog!" he said again. The sound echoed into the silent half darkness. Nothing moved nor stirred. The dog dropped down and walked back across the yard to the porch steps. He sat down on the bottom step and watched the Roog. The Roog glanced at him. Then he stretched his neck up to the window of the house, just above him. He sniffed at the window.

The dog came flashing across the yard. He hit the fence, and the gate shuddered and groaned. The Roog was walking quickly up the path, hurrying with funny little steps, mincing along. The dog lay down against the slats of the gate, breathing heavily, his red tongue hanging. He watched the Roog disappear.

The dog lay silently, his eyes bright and black. The day was beginning to come. The sky turned a little whiter, and from all around the sounds of people getting up echoed through the morning air. Lights popped on behind shades. In the chilly dawn a window was opened.



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The dog did not move. He watched the path.

In the kitchen Mrs. Cardossi poured water into the coffee pot. Steam rose from the water, blinding her. She set the pot down on the edge of the stove and went into the pantry. When she came back Alf was standing at the door of the kitchen. He put his glasses on.

"You bring in the paper?" he said.

"It's outside."

Alf Cardossi walked across the kitchen. He threw the bolt on the back door and stepped out onto the porch. He looked into the gray, damp morning. At the fence Boris lay, black and furry, his tongue out.

"Put the tongue in," Alf said. The dog looked quickly up. His tail beat against the ground. "The tongue," Alf said. "Put the tongue in."

The dog and the man looked at one another. The dog whined. His eyes were bright and feverish.

"Roog!" he said softly.

"What?" Alf looked around. "Someone coming? The paperboy come?"

The dog stared at him, his mouth open.

"You certainly upset these days," Alf said. "You better take it easy. We both getting too old for excitement."

He went inside the house.

The sun came up. The street became bright and alive with color. The postman went along the sidewalk with his letters and magazines. Some children hurried by, laughing and talking.

About 11, Mrs. Cardossi swept the front porch. She sniffed the air, pausing for a moment.

"It smells good today," she said. "That means it's going to be warm."

In the heat of the noonday sun the black dog lay stretched out full length, under the porch. His chest rose and fell. In the cherry tree the birds were playing, squawking and chattering to each other. Once in awhile Boris raised his head and looked at them. Presently he got to his feet and trotted down under the tree.

He was standing under the tree when he saw the two Roogs sitting on the fence, watching him.

"He's big," the first Roog said. "Most Guardians aren't as big as this."

The other Roog nodded, his head wobbling on his neck. Boris watched them without moving, his body stiff and hard. The Roogs were silent, now, looking at the big dog with his shaggy ruff of white around his neck.

"How is the offering urn?" the first Roog said. "Is it almost full?"

"Yes." The other nodded. "Almost ready."

"You, there!" the first Roog said, raising his voice. "Do you hear me?

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We've decided to accept the offering, this time. So you remember to let us in. No nonsense, now."

"Don't forget," the other added. "It won't be long."

Boris said nothing.

The two Roogs leaped off the fence and went over together just beyond the walk. One of them brought out a map and they studied it.

"This area really is none too good for a first trial," the first Roog said. "Too many Guardians. . . Now, the northside area —"

"*They* decided," the other Roog said. "There are so many factors —"

"Of course." They glanced at Boris and moved back farther from the fence. He could not hear the rest of what they were saying.

Presently the Roogs put their map away and went off down the path.

Boris walked over to the fence and sniffed at the boards. He smelled the sickly, rotten odor of Roogs and the hair stood up on his back.

That night when Alf Cardossi came home the dog was standing at the gate, looking up the walk. Alf opened the gate and went into the yard.

"How are you?" he said, thumping the dog's side. "You stopped worrying? Seems like you been nervous of late. You didn't used to be that way."

Boris whined, looking intently up into the man's face.

"You a good dog, Boris," Alf said. "You pretty big, too, for a dog. You don't remember long ago how you used to be only a little bit of a puppy."

Boris leaned against the man's leg.

"You a good dog," Alf murmured. "I sure wish I knew what is on your mind."

He went inside the house. Mrs. Cardossi was setting the table for dinner. Alf went into the living-room and took his coat and hat off. He set his lunch pail down on the sideboard and came back into the kitchen.

"What's the matter?" Mrs. Cardossi said.

"That dog got to stop making all that noise, barking. The neighbors going to complain to the police again."

"I hope we don't have to give him to your brother," Mrs. Cardossi said, folding her arms. "But he sure goes crazy, especially on Friday morning, when the garbage men come."

"Maybe he'll calm down," Alf said. He lit his pipe and smoked solemnly. "He didn't used to be that way. Maybe he'll get better, like he was."

"We'll see," Mrs. Cardossi said.

The sun came up, cold and ominous. Mist hung over all the trees and in the low places.

It was Friday Morning.

The black dog lay under the porch, listening, his eyes wide and staring. His

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coat was stiff with hoarfrost and the breath from his nostrils made clouds of steam in the thin air. Suddenly he turned his head and leaped up.

From far off, a long way away, a faint sound came, a kind of crashing sound.

"Roog!" Boris cried, looking around. He hurried to the gate and stood up, his paws on the top of the fence.

In the distance the sound came again, louder now, not as far away as before. It was a crashing, clanging sound, as if something were being rolled back, as if a great door were being opened.

"Roog!" Boris cried. He stared up anxiously at the darkened windows above him. Nothing stirred, nothing at all.

And along the street the Roogs came. The Roogs and their truck moved along, bouncing against the rough stones, crashing and whirring.

"Roog!" Boris cried, and he leaped, his eyes blazing. Then he became more calm. He settled himself down on the ground and waited, listening.

Out in front the Roogs stopped their truck. He could hear them opening the doors, stepping down onto the sidewalk. Boris ran around in a little circle. He whined, and his muzzle turned once again toward the house.

Inside the warm, dark bedroom, Mr. Cardossi sat up a little in bed and squinted at the clock.

"That damn dog," he muttered. "That damn dog." He turned his face toward the pillow and closed his eyes.

The Roogs were coming down the path, now. The first Roog pushed against the gate and the gate opened. The Roogs came into the yard. The dog backed away from them.

"Roog! Roog!" he cried. The horrid, bitter smell of Roogs came to his nose, and he turned away.

"The offering urn," the first Roog said. "It is full, I think." He smiled at the rigid, angry dog. "How very good of you," he said.

The Roogs came toward the metal can, and one of them took the lid from it.

"Roog! Roog!" Boris cried, huddled against the bottom of the porch steps. His body shook with horror. The Roogs were lifting up the big metal can, turning it on its side. The contents poured out onto the ground, and the Roogs scooped the sacks of bulging, splitting paper together, catching at the orange peels and fragments, the bits of toast and egg shells.

One of the Roogs popped an egg shell into his mouth. His teeth crunched the egg shell.

"Roog!" Boris cried hopelessly, almost to himself. The Roogs were almost finished with their work of gathering up the offering. They stopped for a moment, looking at Boris.

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Then, slowly, silently, the Roogs looked up, up the side of the house, along the stucco, to the window, with its brown shade pulled tightly down.

"ROOG!" Boris screamed, and he came toward them, dancing with fury and dismay. Reluctantly, the Roogs turned away from the window. They went out through the gate, closing it behind them.

"Look at him," the last Roog said with contempt, pulling his corner of the blanket up on his shoulder. Boris strained against the fence, his mouth open, snapping wildly. The biggest Roog began to wave his arms furiously and Boris retreated. He settled down at the bottom of the porch steps, his mouth still open, and from the depths of him an unhappy, terrible moan issued forth, a wail of misery and despair.

"Come on," the other Roogs said to the lingering Roog at the fence.

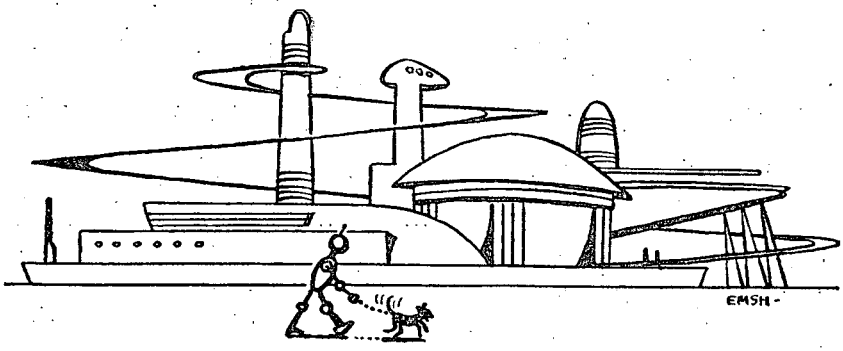
They walked up the path.

"Well, except for these little places around the Guardians, this area is well cleared," the biggest Roog said. "I'll be glad when this particular Guardian is done. He certainly causes us a lot of trouble."

"Don't be impatient," one of the Roogs said. He grinned. "Our truck is full enough as it is. Let's leave something for next week."

All the Roogs laughed.

They went on up the path, carrying the offering in the dirty, sagging blanket.

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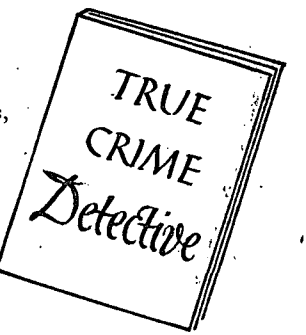


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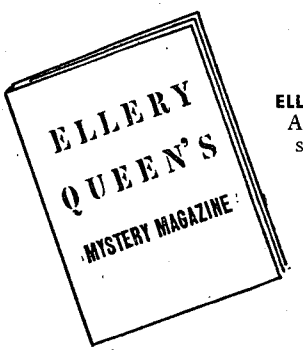


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